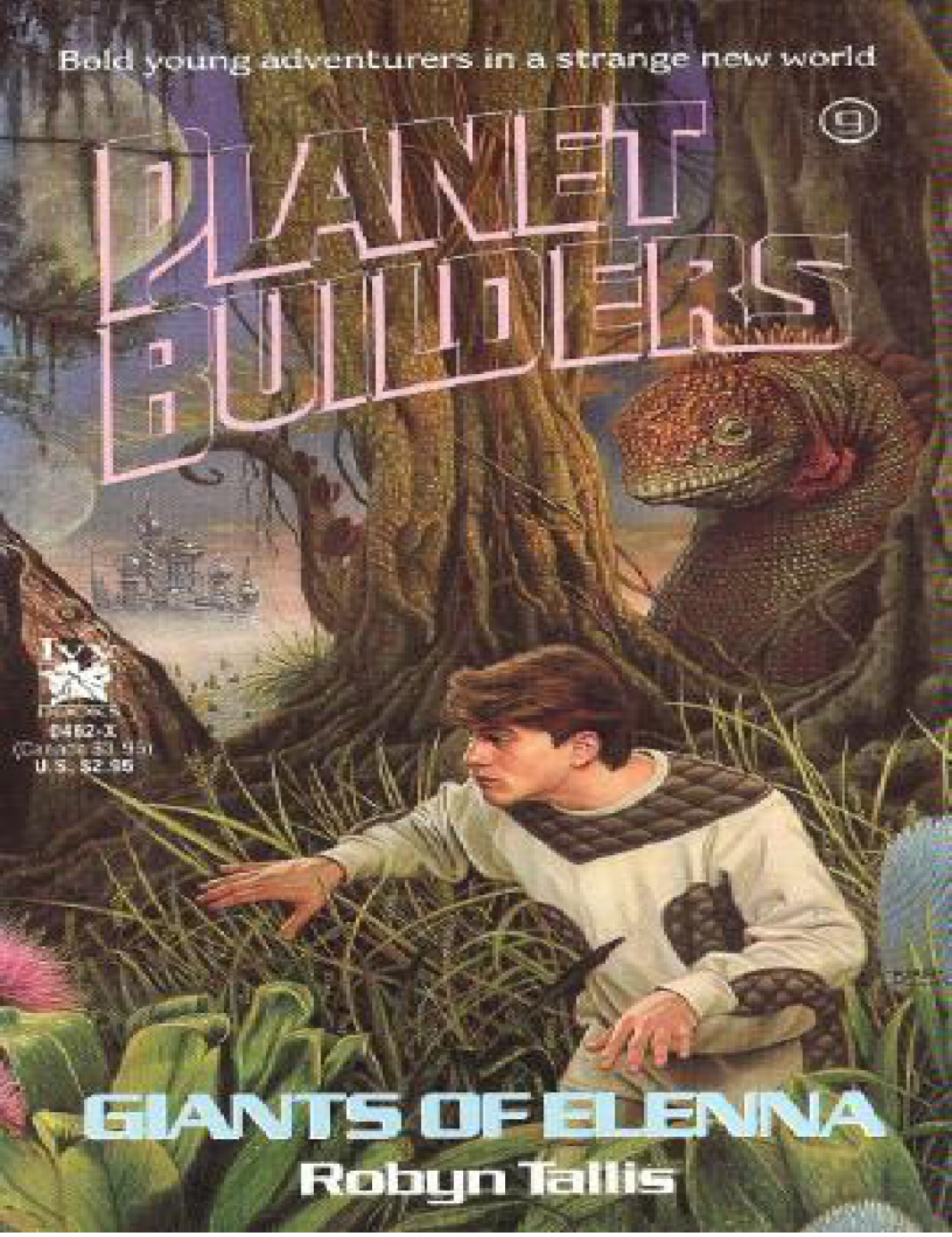
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Ivy Books
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Produced by Butterfield Press, Inc.
96 Morton Street
New York, New York 10014
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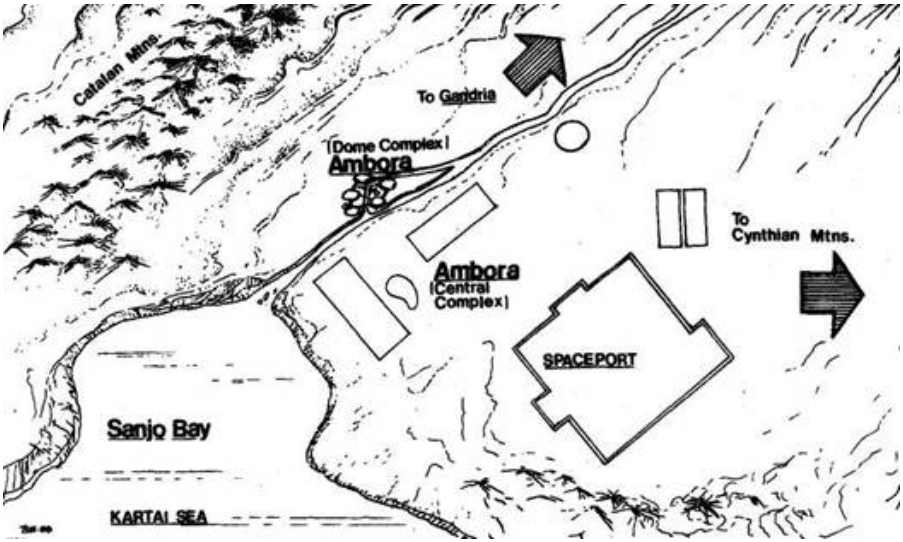
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 89-91174 ISBN 0-8041-0462-X Manufactured in the United States First Edition: August, 1989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CHAPTER ONE

Birthday Bonfire

"What was it like, Zach, to be on Earth and have real birthdays?" Daphne Devries asked.

Clea Tburni watched her friend Daphne roll over and peer up at Zach's face. Daphne's long, shining, magenta-colored hair spilled onto the blue-green grass, catching fiery highlights from the sun riding just above the the sea.

Next to Clea, Zach said lazily, "What do you mean, real birthdays? Do you get invisible gifts, like invisible ink, here?" Zach's shoulder-length brown hair drifted in the brisk breeze, and his wide-spaced brown eyes crinkled slightly, waiting for a joke.

For once it seemed Daphne wasn't making a joke. Her gray eyes looked slightly perplexed, and her long, wiry hands came up, gesturing quickly. "Earth! Where a Standard year isn't just a meaningless bunch of numbers on a computer, looked at only when one

has to send a message or note down the official time. It's a real thing. Like, one day you were thirteen, and the very same day the next year, you were fourteen! Didn't it feel as if that day, each year, belonged to you?" Daphne sat up and turned toward tall, black-haired Sean Matthews. "You were on Earth! How about it?"

Clea watched Sean give a careless shrug. She knew that at one time Sean had been bothered by his family's moving from planet to planet, but he seemed to have come to terms with that. Now he grinned briefly and said, "I wasn't there long enough to have more than one birthday, and I guess I didn't really notice that the real date and the standard date matched."

"Some people don't celebrate birthdays," Noriko Wilder spoke up from beside Sean. Her slanted dark eyes were narrowed against the last bright rays of the sun. "We didn't on Epsi-lon."

"On Acedium we sure did," Will Mornette put in. "We celebrated a lot of stuff. Wasn't much else to do on that barren rock."

"On Theta we did not," Arkady Davidov put in softly. His light blue eyes turned from Daphne to the path leading to the cliffs. The strong, light-haired Thetan divided his attention between listening to the others and watching for Philippa; the pathway was still empty. "But we did celebrate Passage Day, the day the family landed," he added.

"Well, we celebrated birthdays. Big parties," Daphne said. "Maybe because Felicidad is full of actors and they all want to be on stage! But to have a day that's yours I think everyone deserves it. Anyway, I wondered if it felt more special if the day wasn't just numbers on a computer but was a real day, from sunup to sundown, once a year." "I think it's all in your mind," Sean said with a shrug, then added quickly, "though I think it was a good idea to plan this surprise for Philippa. Does anyone know if they celebrate birthdays on Alphorion?"

"Even if they do, I don't think Philippa's family would celebrate hers now," Clea said, reminding the others of the circumstances under which Philippa and her family had emigrated to Gauguin.

Daphne slung her long hair back, her gray eyes npw sparkling with interest. "You know, I've always found it hard to picture the beautiful, polite, aristocratic Philippa Bidding having been involved with a bunch of red-eyed revolutionaries!"

"She was," Zach said. "Though I don't know about the red eyes."

"The one we saw had green eyes," Sean said, wiggling his brows above his own green eyes. "Black hair, too. Whatever his politics, the fellow had excellent looks." After the chorus of groans, Sean glanced around. "Where is Philippa, anyway? After all that secret planning, I hope you toroids didn't forget to tell her to come down here."

"She knew," Clea said, feeling suddenly cold inside. Has something happened? she thought, turning to catch Arkady's eyes. He shook his head slightly. He didn't know.

Clea waited a moment. General conversation began flowing around her again. Clea shut her eyes and reached mentally. And, a few kilometers away, Philippa felt Clea's question through the strange mental current that had connected the eight teens since a mysterious occurrence shortly after their arrival on this new frontier planet.

Philippa was walking slowly over a bridge toward home. The breeze that had sprung up with late afternoon felt chilly, and she'd come very reluctantly to the conclusion that she'd have to go home to get a wrap before she went down to the beach to meet the others. When she felt Clea seeking her, she reacted automatically, shutting off the connection behind a mental shield.

Sorry, Clea, she thought to herself, shuddering. She couldn't help it. Always a private person, Philippa had found the psychic bond hard to adjust to until Sean's recent, overwhelming discovery that the mental current was not an isolated occurrence but had been fostered by an indigenous sentient species. Now it was impossible to accept.

Philippa heard a familiar scratching noise. Her head jerked up she looked around the bridge, backing up against the rail when she spotted a pair of theskies bounding in the brush just below her.

"Ackle, awk!" The theskie chattered in a high, raucous voice. "Go away!" Philippa waved a hand at the creature, whose triangular-shaped, reptilian head canted alertly at her. The theskie's feathery scales were ruffled, and the clawed forelimbs seemed to gesture toward her. "Scat!" Philippa snapped, and the creature leaped away, its long tail disappearing last among the leaves of a shrub. I hope Sean doesn't somehow hear me doing that, she thought nervously. I'll get another lecture on how lucky we are to be the ones who can share minds with these extraordinary creatures. She shook her head, trying to get rid of the thought.

She still could not get used to the fact that Sean really could push his mind into the theskies' skulls and get them to do whatever he liked .... For that matter, she could not get used to the fact that the small, pillow-shaped, soft little creatures called quufers, which everyone in Ambora had adopted as pets, not only could direct the theskies actions but were intelligent possibly more intelligent than humans. Maybe the worst of it was that it was the quufers who were responsible for the current, who'd somehow entered her mind and linked her to the others.

She shivered again. Though the rest of the gang seemed to be thoroughly taken with wonder at the discovery of another sentient species, Philippa only reaction had been repulsion. Nobody else seemed to feel this way, but ever since she'd found out that the quufers could think and plan, she hated the thought of quufers in her room, nesting on her pillow. Spying. Luckily, the three she'd "adopted" seemed to have picked up her unvoiced feelings, and she had not seen them since Sean first announced his discovery.

Sean. He'd made the big discovery, and he'd nearly lost his life in doing so. Her mind veered away from that memory and produced another green-eyed, black-haired young man: Miguel. Only instead of seeing those smiling green eyes, and his tall, strong form as he'd moved so vitally through her life three years before, her memory produced that terrible image of Miguel as she 5and Arkady had found him at the last slumped over, his clothes dark with blood, his face drained of all life. Dead, so very far from home ...

It's my fault he's dead my fault If I hadn't asked him to to hide Arkady and me, he'd still be alive right now, working peacefully at the fish farm....

She shook her head violently. What is it about me? Everything I care about seems to get destroyed.

She looked up again, her eyes dry and achy. All over Admin Hill, lights winked on in the domes belonging to Ambora's administrative families. Shadowy side streets leaped into visibility as glowglobes were lit; splashes of light reflected in the water below. She looked

down at the rushing water. It flowed steadily toward the sea, where the others were gathered for the back-to-school

party. They were waiting for her; she could feel them, somewhere deep inside her skull.... The quufers tied us together with this weird mental current. None of us asked for it and now we can't get rid of it.

Philippa gripped the rail of the bridge, trying to steady herself.

Time to shake this mood! Go home, get a wrap, and go to the beach. Forget about the quufers, the theskies. She stopped herself just before she heard the mental echo: Miguel.

With any luck her parents would be out, or at least closed into their part of the family home. She walked swiftly up the street.

The door cycled open just as she reached the walkway. Her father stood in the lighted rectangle, his eyes glowing a soft, pale green. For a moment Philippa was tempted to run, but she knew he could see her by the same telltale phosphorescent glow in her own eyes. "Philippa," Mr. Bidding said, "I was just about to send the robot to seek you."

Her parents were usually about as interested in her movements as they would be in a communicable disease, and their usual tone of voice toward her (when they were forced to speak to her) was a special dry-ice politesse that only aristocrats long-trained in the art of snubbing people attained. Now her father sounded almost.. .friendly.

Philippa's insides tightened. When her father sounded friendly, it meant only one thing: he was up to something. Most of the time, his "friendly" voice was aimed at his

political allies or enemies. When he used it on her it meant trouble.

"Come in, dear," he said. "Your mother and I have a surprise for you."

Distinctly apprehensive now, Philippa walked inside. Old habit straightened her back and smoothed her face into an expressionlessness blank. Behind her, the friendly voice went on, "Did you know that this is your birthday, by Standard count?"

"That might mean something if we were

living on Earth," Philippa replied. Good, her

voice sounded fairly calm.

In the "salon," which is what her parents insisted on calling their living room, despite the fact they were now living in a round dome made of silana and not a twenty-room marble palace on Alphorion, Philippa's mother greeted her words with a little trill of laughter. Scarier and scarier, Philippa thought.

"Isn't it funny to reflect on the odd customs we still cling to in the name of civilization?" her mother said sweetly. "But then, why not? They make life so pleasant. Come and join us in a toast to your birthday, dear. Another very old custom." Philippa saw her father

open a slim bottle and pour out a golden liquid. With a shock, she recognized it as one of the rare, expensive liqueurs he had ordered from Earth, which were usually only brought out when her parents were stalking the deadliest of political adversaries.

He poured out three glasses, handed one to her and one to her mother, then saluted Philippa with a graceful gesture and a smile. Philippa responded with a smile just as polite and just as false, and cautiously sipped the liqueur. She braced herself for the fire on her tongue, and the harsh-to-strange taste; she'd learned very young how to drink such things, and she'd always hated them.

"Exquisite," Mrs. Bidding said, sipping hers with eyes half closed. "I remember tasting one almost as pure and, curiously enough, it was the year I turned seventeen. Not long after I was formally 'brought out' in society."

"We served it at our engagement ball," her father said. "Midsummer's eve remember how warm it was?"

Philippa listened as she pretended to sip again. Reminders of Alphorion. Are they aimed at me?

"What do you think, dear?" her mother turned to her.

Philippa summoned up a bland smile and voice, "It's wonderful." If she said what she thought or did what she'd like which would be to dump the stuff out and march out the door they would start on how rotten her manners were and how it was her own fault she was no longer on Alphorion, being trained with the planet's best and brightest young alpha-status aristocrats. Sit and smile until they say whatever it is they've got in mind, she told herself.

"Of course, your experience of this particular blend cannot be wide," her father said instructively. "It's important to be able to distinguish between the true blend and a syn-tho-blend."

"I'm certainly not going to get much experience on a planet with two cities and no imports," Philippa said in defense and then realized she'd made a big mistake.

Her father set his glass down and leaned back on the couch, smiling expansively. "That's very true. Conditions here are regrettably primitive, are they not? And likely to remain so," he added with a resigned air.

Well, even if I asked for it, at least they 'II get it out and over faster.

"We have a surprise for you, my dear, and chose today to give it to you," her mother went on. "A surprise that only two thousand other parents in the entire Planetary League can give to their daughters this year."

"An opportunity to resume your training," her father said.

"Your real training," her mother chimed in, making a languid

gesture with her empty crystal goblet.

Philippa's father jumped up to refill the empty glasses, and said. "Your mother and I have applied on your behalf, and we just received word that you've been awarded a place in the Trelour-Essal Lyceum in the Eleven Stars asteroid cluster."

"Salut!" Mrs. Bidding raised her glass.

Philippa set hers down on the little mosaic table, and the crystal rang brightly. What's the use? I can't win any battles, not while we play according their rules. "I know where it

is," she said, still trying to sound calm and polite. "And of course I've heard of it. It's a ver-ry famous, and ver-ry expensive finishing school for the Problem Daughters of the Elite, and though it supposedly has windows showing the gorgeous view of those asteroids, I've also heard that the girls haven't much time for looking."

"You would be working hard, certainly, but surely you are not afraid of that," her mother countered.

"Hard work is one thing," Philippa said plainly, trying to meet the eyes of each of her parents in turn, "but being molded whether I like it or not into a suitable wife for an ambitious young diplomat is not the life I had in mind."

"Just what do you have in mind, dear?" Her mother smiled, her blue eyes wide and cold as the ice on those faraway asteroids.

"Weeding plants in the hydroponics labs? Monitoring robot-delivery sleds?" Her father named two of the common drudge chores that students routinely did.

"At least it's honest work," Philippa said, rapidly losing her temper. "And it's something I'd be choosing "

"We remember your choices," her mother fired back, direct as a laser. "That's why we're all here on this primitive planet, isn't it?"

Philippa flushed, biting back an angry retort.

Her father smiled genially. "Well, what's past is past. We'll always regret having to leave

Alphorion it's only natural. But we seem to be making a place for ourselves here. Our particular training and skills are desperately needed, in fact. What we wish to do for you, Philippa, is give you some of that same training. We can't send you to the best, unfortunately, as you have made yourself permanently non grata anywhere on Alphorion, but we can give you "

"Give me a hoverscooter," Philippa said. "Or nothing. I don't care. I'm not going to Trelour-Essal."

Her mother's crystal rang on the table with a cold, crisp ching. "I'm afraid I have to remind you that you are still a minor. We have exerted ourselves tremendously on your behalf, despite the stupid and selfish choices you made on Alphorion that forced us into exile, and

despite your having been in continual trouble here."

"Your recent coup," her father said as he corked the bottle and put it away, "harboring your fugitive criminal friend Miguel Arcaro, and not reporting his presence on this planet indicated to us that you require a stronger authority."

"We hardly wish to function as police," her mother said with evident distaste. "Though that seems to be precisely what you need."

"In the meantime, we have our own careers to consider, and you shall not be permitted to ruin those a second time." Her father's voice was deadly cold. "When the next colony ship

appears, two months from now, you will be on the satellite, waiting to depart with it."

"I won't do it," Philippa said huskily, trying to keep a last vestige of control over her voice. "I won't." She ran toward the front door.

"Where do you think you're going, you stupid girl?" Her mother's voice followed her. "You may as well sulk in your room and spare the populace there's nowhere else to go."

"My friends are waiting for me."

Philippa's hand slapped the door control. She ran out into the cool night air and crossed the neatly manicured lawn to the street. Behind her, she heard the door shut again.

CHAPTER TWO

More Birthday Fireworks

Clea lay on the the edge of the cliff and gazed over the edge at the black sands below. Far out on the horizon the last rim of the sun sank behind her the others talked quietly. Clea looked at them, thinking back to her arrival on Gauguin.

It seemed unbelievable that she'd left Galahad, the planet of her birth, fearing that life on a frontier planet would be dull. From the moment she had awakened from the transport's deep sleep and gazed into Sean Matthews's green eyes, life had not been dull. Exciting, scary, funny, sad; but never dull.

Now, she looked at Zach, who was watching the last ruby-glowing rim of the sun above the deep blue horizon. He seemed to feel her attention, and though he did not turn his head, she felt his mind reach toward hers: "Clea? You all right?"

"Remembering," she thought back. She felt his reaction a series of rapid memory images from the first adventures she'd shared with Zach and the others in the current.

She remembered how she and five of the others had been accidentally stranded far off in the Cynthian Mountains while planting earthquake-energy-displacement devices. They'd been drawn by a weird mental call to a plateau to witness something tremendously important: a recording of the last days of a fabulous city. The recording had been made by a being who must have been about the same "age" as Clea and her friends. Through the recording they'd watched the destruction of his civilization, and they'd all felt his grief at the war that he could not prevent.

Shortly afterward, a quake struck the plateau, destroying all evidence of the city and the recording. Later, back in Ambora, the larger of the planet's two cities, they'd tried to tell the adults what they'd seen. No one believed them.

Clea did not like to remember those days, or some of the mysterious and often violent things that happened later.

It was just recently that a double discovery shook not only the planetary authorities but was still reverberating light-years away, at the Planetary League headquarters on Earth. First, the minds that had

summoned the kids, and with whom the eight kids were now just learning to communicate with on a telepathic level, were a sentient race the first

the humans had discovered since they'd begun exploring other planets.

The second discovery was of a traitor in the planet's administration, one who had not stopped at murder to cover his identity: Marc Oblitt, a young teacher at the Bradbury School. He had been very popular with the kids popular and trusted.

Clea looked up and caught a brief but searching gaze from Zach. He leaned over to brush his lips against the top of her head. Before he could speak, a raucous cry rose up from the narrow strip of beach far below. Clea and Zach looked down. A pack of twenty or thirty theskies ran along the water's edge, the smallest ones bounding playfully from rock to rock and splashing in the foam.

A shadow moved on Clea's other side as Sean dropped down beside her. "There they go. Quufers must've alerted 'em that the tide's coming in," he said cheerfully.

"Have you ever heard the quufers telling the theskies what to do?" Daphne spoke up from behind.

Sean shook his head. "They don't 'tell,' not in words. They kind of pop in and direct only not quite that either. I guess I can't really explain it because I don't understand it myself."

"But you can do it?" Will asked.

In answer, Sean leaned his hands on his knees, dropped his head down, and shut his eyes. The rest of the gang crowded to the edge of the cliff and watched as one of the

theskies below veered out of the racing pack, stopped, and waved its claw at them in a very human gesture. "Hi, guys!" They just barely caught the shrilly yelped words on the rising breeze.

Will whistled. "Whew, that's mighty weird!"

"It still makes me dizzy," Sean said, rubbing his eyes.

"Then get your hide away from that cliff," Noriko said grimly, yanking his arm. Sean obligingly moved away from the cliffs edge.

"Why don't the quufers use the theskies to talk to us, then?" Daphne asked practically. "You certainly seem to be able to do it."

"It's not the same between them, either," Sean said. "The theskies don't really notice me there, and they don't remember me having been in their minds. With the quufers, though, it's . . . different. They're aware of each other. We already know that theskies physically take care of the quufers." He turned to Clea. "Right?"

The others turned to look at her, and Clea felt a warm color rising under her skin. She'd learned some surprising facts on her recent ocean expedition with Zach; she'd also been introduced to more

mysterious creatures whose ways of communication were even more difficult to fathom. "It's true," she said. "As for communication between the various lifeforms, there's no way to know how it happens, or how much, but after what I saw and

heard among the jonahs, and the shadows, it's definitely there."

"I just wish you could teach us how to do that," Will waved below at the disappearing theskies. "Without us having to be nearly brained by evil mallium miners first," Daphne put in firmly.

"Philippa!" Clea heard the usually quiet Arkady exclaim gladly.

Clea and the others all turned to see a familiar tall, pale-haired figure coming down the path. Philippa was probably the most beautiful girl in the school and the most difficult to get to know. Still, prickly and moody and stand-offish as she was, Clea had also discovered that she was loyal, courageous and very lonely. "Welcome, Pippa!" she called, smiling at her friend.

"Hello," Philippa said. "What's going on?"

Clea hesitated, meeting Sean's eyes. They all knew that talk of the mental current and the quufers bothered the girl from Alphorion. Now an awkward silence fell, as everyone consciously turned their attention away from a topic they found intriguing.

Daphne, the social expert, was the first to bridge the awkward moment; as Philippa walked the last few meters down the path, she turned and pulled a container forward. Lifting the lid, she made a flourishing gesture toward a round baked shape that had been decorated with colorful swoops and swirls, "la-da! Happy birthday!"

"Happy birthday!" the others cried.

In the twilight, Philippa's complexion seemed more pale than usual. She smiled politely and dropped down next to Arkady. "Thank you," she said. "How did you know?"

"I had drudge duty at the school admin office, entering everybody's classes for next rotation, and I came across birthdays," Daphne explained breathlessly. "Saw yours coming soon, talked to Zach, who found this recipe for a real, old-fashioned birthday cake in the archives and here you are!"

There was a moment of silence. Clea felt the others expecting a reaction from Philippa, and perhaps the Alphorionite felt it as well, for she said, "This is very kind of you "

Zach moved suddenly. "You forgot the fire," he said to Daphne. "They lit the tops of these things with fire."

"Candles!" Daphne corrected, plunging her hand into her bag. "And here are some substitutes! I didn't put them on because I couldn't figure out how to do it and not mess up the icing."

Zach and Daphne fussed over the cake, covering Philippa's lack of enthusiasm. Clea turned to study her friend, whose snow-colored hair

reflected the last violet rays of the disappearing sun. Philippa's face was in shadow but her eyes glowed with the soft green that marked anyone from Alphorion. The glow was caused by an otherwise harmless parasite in the sclera; the glow also effectively hid any expression. Clea reached mentally and encountered a familiar mental

wall. Philippa had been one of the first to learn how to shield her mind from the others, and she was using that shield now.

"Here! Seventeen!" Daphne said, sitting back on her heels. "Now, Zach, you light them, and Philippa, you are to blow them out. In one breath, if you can."

"What's the purpose of lighting them and blowing them out again?" Noriko asked.

Zach shrugged. "I don't know, but it was part of an ancient flatscreen vid I found in the archives. Called Sixteen Candles. Philippa, you've got to make a wish first!"

Clea watched as Philippa closed her eyes, then suddenly leaned forward and blew very hard. The Steady-Flame matches all winked out.

"What did you wish?" Zach asked.

Daphne waved her hands. "No! She can't tell anyone, or it won't come true!"

"That's ridiculous," Noriko said bluntly. "Let's eat the cake."

"Good idea," Will said, leaning forward to help Daphne slice and distribute pieces. Philippa sat quietly, watching.

When Clea got her piece, she bit cautiously, then grinned. "This is great! Light and sweet! Somehow I'd gotten the impression historical foods were all coarse and half-spoiled."

Zach snorted. "If the food was so lousy, why did the population grow so fast? Well, if Philippa can't tell her wish, why don't we try ours? Just think! Our last cycle of school. . .

which will also mean no more drudge excuse me voluntary service!"

"Right," Sean said grimly. "It'll be full time, and called 'work.'"

"No more jugtime if we break piddly rules," Will sighed.

"We'll be of age," Sean said. "That means if we break rules we are criminals, and additional community service would be pleasant compared to the slammer."

"This conversation is depressing," Daphne interrupted loudly.

A few of the gang laughed; Clea saw Philippa staring down at the untouched piece of cake in her hands. Despite that awful mental shield, or maybe because of it, I get the feeling Philippa's hiding a real low mood, Clea thought. And I wonder if the others are picking it up in some way.

"I won't have it!" Daphne went on. "Here we are, on a gorgeous

evening, just before a year of school during which we are the leaders, then afterward ... anywhere in the galaxy we want! I for one mean to send a message straight to Mr. Kraft and my mother on Felicidad, to remind them of their promise. I want to star in at least three vids a year while I'm still young and brilliant!" She fluffed her hair, ignoring the chorus of coughs and gags made by her loyal fans.

"And I'll be making them," Will said, grinning as Daphne caught his hand and squeezed it. "The more I see of the technology, the more interested I become."

Clea glanced at Arkady, who as usual didn't say much. He was watching Philippa, and she thought she caught a hint of concern in the Thetan's cool blue eyes.

"No big changes for me," Zach said mildly. "My mother happens to be the best around for pediatric health care, so I may as well stick around for a time and learn what I can."

He gave Clea a quick smile, and though Clea could not quite see his expression in the deepening twilight, she could feel reassurance radiating from him. This was still something they had to talk out: Clea was feeling more drawn to the studies of xeno-biology than to human biology, which meant she might be obliged to leave this planet for one of the big universities located on an older planet. She also wanted to stay with Zach. She felt torn, and so did he luckily they did not have to make any decisions right away.

Will then turned to Sean. "How about you? Staying around, even if your father gets appointed elsewhere?"

Sean reached over to clap hands with Nor-iko. "Funny you should ask," he said. "Not two days ago my parents were entertaining some honcho from the Planetary League Space Patrol, and I spoke with him about recruitment on behalf of myself and Wilder here. Looks like we'll be shipping out for basic training about this time next year."

Through the surprised exclamations of the others came Philippa's voice, low and angry: "Isn't that lucky! And won't you two have fun

shooting at me when you're sent to vaporize rebels on Alphorion."

Sean gazed at her, mouth open. Before he could reply, Philippa said in a husky, almost-quavering voice to Daphne, "I'm sorry. I guess I'm not really in the mood for a party." "Philippa ..." Arkady said quietly, trying to catch her hand.

She shook her head and walked away, leaving the party in smoldering remains behind her.

She paid no attention to where she was going; glowglobes loomed like smeary stars through the tears in her eyes. She kept running until a familiar, quiet voice slowed her.

"Philippa." It was Arkady. "What happened?"

Warm and strong, his arms came around her. She stopped, gasping

for breath, and leaned against him, her eyes pressed against his broad shoulder. "My parents. Going to force me to go ... to a horrible school..." She fought to regain control of her breathing.

Arkady sighed. "I'm sorry," he said.

Philippa felt the flood of real regret and unhappiness that accompanied the simple words. She said tightly, "I'm not going."

"If there is any way I can help you," he murmured.

"Run away with me," she said quickly. "I can't stand it with them anymore, I've got to get away. It's not just this corrosive new plan of theirs it's everything. Life with them is a

constant reminder of how guilty I am! I can't live with that any more!"

"All right." His hands slid up her shoulders, bracing them firmly. "Then let's take a look at your options."

"What options?" she said bitterly. "Everyone in Ambora knows my parents, and even if they don't like them, they can hardly do anything against them, not when my parents are Planning Committee Directors! Come with me maybe we can go up to Gandria, find something to do there!"

"Like work at the fish farms?" Arkady asked, his fingers tightening briefly.

Philippa heard the faint note of reserve that entered his quiet voice, but at first it did not register. "Yes!" she exclaimed.

"Your friend Miguel got that job because he had fake ID," Arkady said. The reserve deepened, then disappeared under a soft, soothing tone. "Let's take a night to think this out. After all, much as they might want to, your parents can't force you off-planet tonight."

Philippa held her breath, remembering another time and place not long before when she'd been on the run with Arkady, hiding from the miners who'd nearly killed Sean. It was my idea that time and look what happened. She steadied her voice. "I'm sorry, Arkady. I'm being stupid. Look, 111 handle my parents you don't need to get involved."

"But I want to help you," he said quietly.

She forced herself to smile. "If you had your own starship and, oh ... say, a zillion or so

credits, I think you could help me just fine. There's nothing wrong with my parents and me that a distance of at least ten star systems won't cure."

Arkady's fingers tightened for a moment on her shoulders, then they dropped away. The joking tone created the little bit of distance she needed. He smiled back, though his eyes remained questioning. "It's all right to let someone help you," he began slowly. "You promised us last time you wouldn't try to go it alone." He hesitated again, studying her.

Last time. The words seemed to hang in the air between them.

Again Philippa saw Miguel's dead face. Yes, and when I called in his debt by asking for his help, it was the last thing he ever did.

She shook her head hard, trying to dismiss the image. "Sorry, Arkady, but I think it's better if I just handle this on my own."

"Because now that Miguel's gone, there's no one else you trust?"

"What? Why'd you bring him up?" The cold wind made her shiver, and blew her hair across her face in spectral strands, making it hard for her to see. She wiped it back and blinked away the sting of the wind blurring her eyes.

Arkady gestured, a quick sharp wave of the hand. "Bring him up? I don't think he's ever really been away from your thoughts. You talk about running away to Gandria and the fish farms, where he'd been hiding."

"It was just an idea "

"Philippa," he said, interrupting for the first time ever. "The only time I ever saw you ask anyone for help was when you called Miguel. That was after that last freeball game, when you played just for him, and after ..." He stopped, then turned abruptly. "Look, I'm sorry. This feels too much like an accusation and defense. It's not fair, to either of us. You really cared about Miguel."

"Yes, I did," said Philippa, feeling numb. "And now he's dead." And I don't want the same thing to happen to you."

Arkady spread his hands. "It feels like you'll never trust me, never have any kind of a real relationship while you're carrying this ghost around with you, a perfect ghost, against whom no living guy can ever hope to compete."

"Ghost? What are you talking about?"

"About your dream vision of the perfect hero, Miguel Arcaro. He's there in every conversation, Philippa every discussion, every date. Ibu don't think anyone can measure up, and frankly, I don't think anyone can, either. Maybe it's better if I resign from the competition. So I'll say good night and wish you a very good life."

He turned and walked quickly down the street toward his home.

CHAPTER THREE

Honest Work

If Zach Yamoto was surprised to come home from a night shift at the Medical Dome and find, among the usual mob of siblings, sibling pals, theskies and quufers, three of his friends, he didn't show it. "Looking for a free breakfast of vintage Yamoto cuisine?" he greeted Clea, Sean and Daphne. For Clea he added a special smile, and an inward thought, Glad to see you.

He saw from Clea's brief return smile, which didn't reach those huge topaz eyes, that she was upset. He figured he knew the cause: he'd felt a sudden flash of anger last night while he was walking from the party to the Med Dome, followed by total mental silence from Arkady and Philippa. With Clea he'd bring this up right away, but with the others it felt too much like gossip. He knew that some of them had ambivalent feelings about this mental current business it was

very easy to see it as a major invasion of privacy.

So he said only, "Who's hungry?" and set out some citrus juice and a plate of hot crispy rolls from the food preparator.

Sean picked one up absently, tossing it from hand to hand to cool it off. From the other room, they heard a shriek of anger, followed by squabbling little-kid voices, then silence. The front door cycled open then closed; the youngest Yamotos had just raced off to school.

"One great thing," Zach said, settling into his chair and leaning back dangerously, "about coming back from a night shift, is being caught by Santori and having a bona fide, 100 percent steel-plated excuse for walking away from school just before morning shift."

Daphne laughed. "Was he disappointed?"

Zach nodded. "Crushed is the operative word, here, I think. He must have concocted some exceptionally fiendish jug duties last night, and was prowling around hoping to net some victims first thing. Zach \amoto, I'm glad to say, was not to be number one on the list. But what about you characters? Excuses all?"

"Morning shift off," Sean said, biting into his roll. "And the house is full of these Planetary League brass and nosy politicos who just landed yesterday, to begin the 'preliminary investigations' into our 'claims' of

another sentient species. I'm making myself scarce
until Dad can ferry them up to that posh guest house on the cliff."

"So now it begins," Zach said, grinning. "That the guest house our Pippa used to hide her revolutionary pal Miguel in?"

Sean nodded. "The very one. Good and out of the way. We'll soon be crawling with every ambitious bureaucrat who can think up an excuse to come investigating, and who has enough clout to grab a ship to do it in." He grimaced. "My dad has to house them being governor and talk to them, but he promised to shield us as much as possible. As my mom pointed out, they'll naturally hate the idea that only a bunch of kids can communicate with the quufers, and they'll want to try a lot of tests on quufer-communications themselves. I don't know whether I hope they'll believe it about the quufers or not, because if they do, it's going to be time for the lab coats and tests for the eight of us. Nine of us," he corrected.

"Nine?" Zach echoed.

"Ginny Mornette-Riedel," Sean reminded him. "The first baby born on this planet."

"And the only child to actually have been stolen by the quufers for a period of time," Zach finished. "How could I forget that? Have you told anyone she can contact you mind to mind?"

Sean shook his head slowly. "That's one question I'm trying to work through now. She's just a baby learning to crawl and shake a rattle and Will and Paul and their parents are really protective of her. They want
her to have a normal babyhood. She can't talk yet, of course, so the tests will probably be the usual is-she-in-good-health stuff, then they'll leave her pretty much alone. That is if I don't talk about how much the quufers rewired her brain. And if I do keep it secret so she can grow up without being poked and prodded by all these scientist types then am I actually doing harm to all humankind or to the possibility of communication with the only other sentient species we've found?"

"I don't think so," Clea said softly. "As you say, she can't talk yet. And she can't really communicate with the quufers yet. When she gets old enough and it really starts to happen, that's the time to let her come forward to let the scientists know."

Sean's face brightened hopefully. "You really think so?"

Clea nodded. "I know so. Maybe it'd be different if all the bureaucrats and the politicians and so forth were really, well, enlightened. But my own experiences, when Zach and I were debriefed after being lost up north, convinced me that some of them, despite their adult ages and their positions and experience, were kind of... limited." She wrinkled her nose.

Zach grinned, knowing how she hated saying anything unkind

about anyone. "Stupid is the word," he offered.

Clea smiled reluctantly. "Well, I didn't think it exactly perceptive when Mr. Van Dobbie said to me, when I was trying to explain the jonahs and the shadows you remember I never

really saw the shadows, but I know they were there just the same." Here Clea lowered her voice to a pompous rumble, " 'If you were on Earth, Miss Tburni, you'd probably be trying to convince us that dragons exist. Please keep to the facts of what you did see.'"

"And Van Dobbie is one of the main ones yapping at my father now," Sean said grimly. "That convinces me: Ginny stays out of the labs." He rolled his eyes. "Wish I could say the same for my mind!"

"She communicates with you?" Zach asked, with interest.

"If you can call it communication." Sean laughed. "I'll be sitting in school, sweating over a killer equation in physics, and there's this friendly little bubble in my brain saying, I'm hungry! As if I can do anything about it! Or worse, the other night, Noriko and I were sitting on the bridge, enjoying being together "

"Translate that as 'kissing.'" Daphne grinned.

"And there was the little bubble, curiously wondering what I was doing. I can't really block her out I mean, I might if I tried, but then I'm afraid she'd feel cut off. Like any other baby feels when it's closed into a room and doesn't want to be there."

Zach frowned. "If you want, I can talk to my mom in a general way and see if she has any suggestions."

Sean nodded, getting up. "Please! Your mom is about the best we've got for all this empathic stuff, and I could use a way of getting the kid to knock first before entering. But I don't want everyone at the Research Dome to know about all this, until we're all ready to talk."

"'All,'"Zach repeated.

Sean grimaced. "Haven't we been here before?"

"You mean Philippa?"

"Just when we have to unite, she gets into some sort of mess and backs out on us. And this time she's really blocking us off. I can tell the quufers can't reach her, either," Sean added, sounding perplexed. "And since last night, Arkady's also out of circulation." He turned toward the door. "I'm not going to interfere I get too mad too quick with that girl. Especially after that crack about shooting down civilians last night. But if you can get her to see reason, I'm all for it."

Daphne got up as well. "I'll go with you. Will's drudging at the Transpo Dome, or he'd have come, but he's really anxious about Ginny since those scientists showed up. I think I'll go right away and let him know what's been decided. He'll be glad."

"See you at school." Zach waved lazily, and the two departed.

When the door had cycled shut behind them, Clea said, "I reported

myself sick to school today. Philippa called me this morning, from downtown. She spent the night in the rec center, watching vids. I invited her over, and she was pretty tired and grubby. She's asleep at my place now and my parents had promised me before she arrived that they'd stay out of it. So that kind of leaves it up to us: what do we do? She says she will not go home again ever."

"Do you know what happened?"

"Not with Arkady, only with her parents," Clea said, then related what Philippa had told her about the faraway school and her parents' threat concerning it. "She said she was going to quit school, and try to find some kind of work."

Zach sighed. "Philippa is not exactly the most persuadable person in Ambora. I guess the only thing to do is to let her stay with you, and give her whatever support she'll accept. Meanwhile, Sean's right. Sooner or later we're going to be confronted with a few zillion curious government types, and we'd best present a united front."

"I'd better go back," Clea said worriedly. "She'll probably wake up soon, and I'd like to be there in case she wants to talk more."

At that moment, Philippa was stepping aboard a big hoverbus. She was the last one in. As the craft rose on its pressor beam and accelerated smoothly up the long street, Philippa walked toward the back to find a seat. Out of the back window, she saw the Sanjo Bay's big tidal generator rapidly disappear she'd just come from there after another unsuccessful job try. Now she turned her back on it as she sat down, and it disappeared from her mind.

After she'd gotten a bath and breakfast,
Clea had seen her settled in a bed and then
left for school, but Philippa found she
couldn't sleep. Words from the last night's
confrontations, both the spoken and the I—
wish-I'd-said unspoken kind, kept racing
through her mind. Finally she got up and
dressed in the outfit Clea had laid out for her
in case she awoke before Clea's return.

Avoiding Clea's parents in the kitchen, Philippa slipped out the side way. It wasn't that she disliked Clea's parents, or even thought they'd bother her. Clea had said they'd promised not to interfere, and Philippa believed her. It was just that she'd been there before, in the Tburni home at breakfast time, and the sight of a family, talking and laughing together was the kind of thing that hurt worse than any angry words or contemptuous threats. After last night, she knew she just couldn't handle it with any kind of finesse.

Besides, she'd mentally prepared a list, in order of interest, of the types of jobs she could do. She thought she should get started right

away on checking places for work, since she'd made her decision.

Now, two dismal hours later, she was on her way back to City Center. She'd assumed it would not be hard to find a job she knew she had an excellent work record at every department where the Third Cohort kids did drudge. She really enjoyed some of those jobs and wouldn't mind having them all day.

But when she got to the main offices and made her desires known, it was to face blank amazement or incredulity: Why wasn't she going to school? Didn't she know that each worker as well as each student was carefully fitted into the schedules before he or she even landed as a colonist? What was the matter with Bradbury School, anyway, that she had to leave before finishing?

The last list of uncomfortable questions, at the tidal generator personnel office, had been particularly vexing, as the director, Dr. Katya Kovitch, was also a highly respected teacher at the school. Philippa had given lame answers to very penetrating questions; she just could not give any of the real reasons.

She sighed, and leaned her head back against the seat. She felt that warning tightness around her forehead that meant too much stress. No wonder: half a night sitting watching vids in the IRC because it was too cold to sleep out in the open; no food since lunch yesterday; arguments, questions, and above all her determination to keep herself out of that current. If the quufers wanted to entertain themselves by spying on human minds, they could do without hers.

She caught sight of the five domes of City Center, gleaming brightly in the sunlight. The hoverbus rounded a green hill, and between the tall native vellkul trees she glimpsed the huge waterfall that thundered between the City Center domes. They'd be there soon. She'd best employ her mind in

thinking about where she wanted to go first. The Research Dome, then perhaps the Medical Dome ...

The bus stopped. She stepped out, walking slowly behind the other passengers who hurried up to the skywalks that connected the huge domes. Midshift was about to start. For a moment Philippa felt peculiar; she was not the kind of person who liked to be late. But no more school. She needn't worry.

Sure, she thought, looking down at the foaming water rushing by from the falls. Needn't worry, not while they're all crowding around to hire my great brain and talents.

"Philippa?" an adult voice spoke behind her. It was the voice of authority. Her back straightened unconsciously; she turned to find Dr. Ives, the director of Bradbury School, walking toward her. An older man, his long, spare form betrayed his Alphorionite heritage in its erect carriage. His nickname was X-Ray a nickname that wasn't

entirely due to the glowing eyes common to all Alphorionites. Philippa's heart began hammering.

Instead of demanding to know where she'd been that morning, and assigning her immediately to extra community service (as Assistant Director Santori would have done) Dr. Ives remained silent until he joined her on the skywalk. Then he turned to face the canal far below. "I'd like to talk to you," he said not in Standard, but in Alphorionite French, which no one passing by them could understand. "No threats, no sermons."

Philippa looked at him in mute amazement. She had to swallow twice before her voice would work. "I take it everyone's reported to you about my morning search for a job?"

Dr. Ives gave her a brief, slightly ironic smile. "This is still a very small city, Philippa. And you seem to be our first dropout."

She said nothing, gripping her hands tightly.

Dr. Ives transferred his gaze to the waters below again as he said, "Your position has been a difficult one. As it happens, it's also one with which I am not unfamiliar myself."

Philippa's mind suddenly went back to that horrible day, the day Miguel's body was given honor-escort for transport back to Alphorion. Dr. Ives had surprised everyone by stepping forward and draping the Green Freedom flag over the casket the flag of the revolutionaries. Her parents had been disgusted beyond measure, and Philippa had never dared to ask Dr. Ives how or why he'd gotten that flag.

"I wanted to point out a couple of things you might not have considered," Dr. Ives went on. "And then I'd like to request that you reconsider your decision to leave school. Your class rating is excellent. You could take off one full rotation, and not slip behind the rest of your classmates. But that's for later. First, I wish to point out that though you are still considered a minor by Alphorionite law, you are no longer on Alphorion."

Surprise freed her tongue. "You mean I'm free to leave home?"

If he noticed how wavery her voice
sounded, he gave no sign. "In a sense. Under
the League's Pro visionary Charter, granted to
all new colonies, youths above the age of fifteen Standard years gain certain rights. That's
the age at which you begin serving the com
munity with regular duties that which you
students call 'drudge' and in turn you are
granted the right to vote in certain types of
elections, to choose your own course of study,
and, if you desire, to become a ward of the
Planning Committee. This last right was cre

ated to cover young people whose parents might be reassigned and who feel that they would like to remain on a specific colony. However, it can also be invoked in cases such as yours." /

"But my parents are on the Planning Committee," Philippa said.

"True." Dr. Ives smiled thinly. "But, as the primary school authority and the one who would put in the request for wardship mine would be the deciding vote."

Philippa drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"If we put in this request, you will have to agree to accept the decisions of your guardians," Dr. Ives went on. "You'll be given a committee of three, headed by me. I expect Dr. Yamoto will consent to serve on this committee. The third candidate's identity is something we can discuss later."

"I think I'd like that," Philippa said numbly. "But I was hoping to work until I could earn enough credit to get passage home. I feel I owe it to ... someone who can never go back."

Dr. Ives turned to face her. "I went back to Alphorion," he said quietly. "Nearly ten years after my own conviction. Unlike you, I served time in jail for my revolutionary activities. When I got out, I'd lost both my home and my place in the university. I never lost my zeal to return and fight for the cause but when I returned, I realized it was a mistake. My old contacts were either gone, or in jail, or had 'reconsidered.' No one was willing to see me, much less harbor me. And worse, I began to see that while some of my alpha-status loyalist family chaffed at what they saw as the limitations the Planetary League placed on their power, the delta-status masses whom we were supposedly fighting to help were not at all in favor of any revolution spawned by the alphas. They knew that, should we cut free of the Planetary League, they'd lose what few rights they had. None of them have the money or contacts to play at revolutionary politics."

"So you think Miguel the Leffies are wrong?" Philippa exclaimed, deeply troubled by his words.

Dr. Ives shook his head. "No. I'm only telling you what my own experience was. If you do decide to go back, you must be prepared to face these things.

"Let's return to your problems here. Before I can get the guardianship committee set up, you'll need somewhere to stay and something to do. In the meantime, we have a shipfull of new colonists due in very soon. Those colonists left months ago, according to the timetable set by some statistical theorist on Earth, and they will not be interested in why we don't have homes ready. As usual, we are on a dead-heat race against time. I spoke to the head of the construction

crew about to embark for Elenna, the new city, and she is willing to take you as a worker. It will be hard work, but you will be paid for it. Shall I tell her you'll report at the shuttle station, two days from now, at oh five hundred hours?"

Construction labor? That certainly wasn't at the top of my list But a pldce away from Ambora and time to think sounds pretty good. Philippa nodded firmly. "I'll be there."

Dr. Ives gave her his rare smile. "Good. As for the other matter, we will resume discussion on your return." He continued up the skywalk, leaving Philippa to recover her equilibrium in peace.

CHAPTER FOUR

A New Beginning

Clea and Philippa were waiting in the chill of the predawn when Zach drove up in his family's big hovercraft. The pressor beam gently dwindled, setting the craft down, and the door popped open. "Good morning, my doves!" Zach called cheerfully.

Clea turned to watch Philippa heft her bag into the backseat, then climb in after it. Clea slid in next to Zach, and when his hand covered hers and squeezed, she returned the squeeze tightly.

From the back Philippa said quietly, "Thanks a lot for getting up at this hour, and thanks for taking me out to the spaceport."

"No thanks necessary," Zach said lightly. "Going to be a beautiful day, look how clear! You know what this reminds me of?"

"The hot, dry winds that came before those ion storms," Clea said unenthusiastically. "I guess that season'!! begin real soon."

"And you'll be missing it," Zach said to Philippa in the back.

Clea watched Philippa's pale face turn away from the window. She was wearing what Clea called her Polite Mask, as she had been for the last two days. By most people's standards, Philippa had been the perfect guest helpful, mannerly, never asking for anything, self-effacing. Clea found all these things unnerving; the other girl was so firmly locked behind that Alphorionite mask of Good Manners that she never leaked a hint of what she must be feeling or thinking.

"I hope the new silanna compound holds," Philippa said now, courteous as ever.

"Oh, it will," Zach said cheerfully. "It's been bombarded with so many mega-tests I'm sure we won't have any more buildings disintegrating on us. What I'm hoping we can do without are those weird visions a lot of people seemed to get stuck with at the height of the storms. Sean said last night he's going to try to communicate with the quufers about that find out how they handle the problem. If it's a problem for them."

A little silence followed, during which Philippa did not pick up on this promising topic of the current and its effects.

They had reached the spaceport and Zach guided the hovercraft carefully along the huge painted lines that directed traffic. When they

neared the big spaceport dome, they saw a group of people standing near an open doorway. In the light spilling out, Clea

saw that all of the people were adults. They looked old with their features side-lit, and Clea thought of Philippa going alone among them. She shivered, feeling a well of sympathy, but if Philippa sensed it she gave no sign.

"You don't have to wait," Philippa said. "I'll jump out here." One hand was on the door, the other grasping the handle on her bag.

Zach stopped the craft. "Whatever you say!"

Philippa murmured her thanks again and climbed out.

Clea couldn't let her go, just like that. The questions she hadn't dared to ask formed into an irresistible one; she hit the door control and leaned out. "Philippa," she called, "did you have any, uh, messages for anyone? Like Arkady?"

The weak light showed Philippa's lips tightening, but when she spoke, her voice was soft. "I guess you didn't realize. It was Arkady who said good-bye to me. 'Goodbye and good life,' to be exact. Seems to indicate a message isn't wanted, doesn't it?"

Without waiting for an answer, she turned around again, and walked toward the spaceport lounge. Clea shut the door, then leaned back sadly. "Guess that wasn't the most tactful thing I could have asked."

Zach shook his head as he swung the vehicle around. "It was a good try."

"No, it wasn't," Clea countered. "A good try gets good results. That was just an interfering busybody try."

Zach grinned. "I suppose somewhere in the galaxy there are two people more stiff-necked, closemouthed, and private than Philippa and Arkady, but I think we'd grow wings before we'd find'em."

Clea sighed. "What you're saying is that we should leave them alone."

"Will called me last night," Zach commented. "'Ibid me a couple of choice images from the nightmares he'd picked up from Arkady. But when he asked Arkady if he'd slept okay, our boy said, 'Sure. Why not?'" He laughed a little.

Clea rubbed her hands on the legs of her boorman, the comfortable one-piece garment nearly all the colonists had adopted for work clothes. "And so?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Zach said cheerfully. "We don't waste our time talking to them, we just take other steps."

Clea sighed again, this time with relief.

"And of course Master-Plan Yamoto has a

brilliant idea "

"Bidding, P.?" A disinterested young man carrying a portable

terminal looked up briefly, then typed some words. He paused, staring at his screen; words flowed across it. He looked up again and waved a hand to one side. "Your team is over there. Greens." He turned away.

Philippa wondered if he meant she should join her team now. She picked up her bag and walked to the waiting area he'd pointed at. A group of about twelve people were gathered

there, drinking steaming syntho-coffee and chattering with the ease of long acquaintance. Philippa walked up silently and sat on one of the couches nearby, placing her bag at her feet.

"... so then he gave me this big line about having to ship out at oh five three oh a convenient twelve hours off..."

"... but no sooner did she take a hopper back to the island than she started telling everyone how awful Lin's new perma-dye looked..."

"... if I get a KRKS-10, I can get a deal through someone I know on Vespen ..."

Anywhere she turned, knots of people were gossiping exactly as most of the kids at Bradbury did. Philippa had to laugh at herself. She'd grown up listening to the adults fence with each other at those deadly society parties on Alphorion; her mother in particular was an expert at sweetly "describing" a work of art in such a way that everyone who listened knew she was actually talking about someone among them. While Philippa had never expected people a few years older than herself to talk like headhunting Alphorionite snobs, or like dons from one of the Inner Planet universities, she never thought they'd sound just like kids.

Except they've been to more places, she thought, hearing names of planets, asteroids and space settlements punctuating the talk. Then a buzzer sounded.

"That's us someone announced cheerfully. There was a mass grabbing for bags and a stashing of half-empty cups in the recycling bins. Philippa stood up, and when the crowd started moving off in one direction, she tagged along, hoping she was doing the right thing.

They went out into the clear, cold morning air. The eastern horizon glowed with a faint glimmering of deep violet, and the stars were fading. Philippa breathed deeply, sidling into the rough line that had formed before the ramp of a huge aircar. Voices continued talking and laughing, but it was hard to make out any words above the deep thrumming of idling engines.

The line moved swiftly; soon Philippa saw, then neared, a strong-looking, sun-bronzed woman whom she recognized as Anne Mar-key, the construction boss who'd run the Bradbury drudge detail.

"Kemi Lassen!" Markey greeted the person in front of Philippa. "Glad to see you back. How's that arm?"

"Okay," Lassen said, swinging a hand in a vigorous circle.

Markey waved at the ramp and said, "Just you watch those acrobatics while high-wiring. We're going full-out on this one, and anyone gets injured, I'll personally boot them back to Ambora."

Lassen bounded up the ramp, laughing. Philippa stepped up, to look into Markey's

dark eyes. "Bidding, Philippa, right?" the boss greeted her.

Philippa nodded. Markey smiled. "Thought I recognized that white hair. You're good on the wires, as I recall. Think you can handle full-time hours?"

What else was there to say? "Of course," Philippa said.

Markey grinned. "Go for it! If you have any problems, your team leaders are good people or you can try to find me. I'll be running back and forth between Ambora and Elenna, seeing to the details our project director hasn't time for." She waved a square, competent hand up the ramp. "Go on up. Greens are sitting on the right side, back. Stay with your team. Makes sorting easier at the other end. Get to know some of them, if you can. And," she winked, "if they're loud, be loud right back."

She jerked her head, and Philippa took that as dismissal. She walked up the ramp and entered the aircar. Two long rows of half-filled seats met her eyes, with noisy people wandering up and down the middle aisle. She noticed thin strips of colored tape along the backs of alLthe seats; soon she was in the section of green tape. She found one row of three seats that was empty, quickly stowed her bag, and sank into a seat.

Relief was just making her ease back into the contours when a voice said just above her, "So what kind of an ambush has Fungusnose laid for us this time?"

Philippa looked up to see a tall, lanky blond man with a weather-worn face shoving his bag into the compartment above the row just ahead of hers. "I saw Lassen's back, but they've had to replace Duin. Uh " he exclaimed suddenly, staring down at her. Behind him, two more men were exchanging jokes, but as the blond said loudly, "Now what have we here?" they stopped and also stared.

Philippa's spine straightened. She nodded politely. "Philippa Bidding," she said. "Nice to meet you."

"Don't tell me! You're not a Green?" the guy demanded.

Philippa nodded.

The blond threw back his head and howled with phony anguish. "Didn't I tell you?" he moaned. "Ferguson hates us! Just because we win every time!" His eyes came down, half-humorous and half-challenging, to meet Philippa's. He said, "You may be twelve years old and anemic, which is exactly what you look like, but if you come with the Greens you are going to work or if you value your health you get

off right now! Here, where's your bag? Can I help you out?"

He made a gesture toward the compartment over Philippa's head, but he was still watching her face. Long years of practice kept her face smooth and blank. Inside her, amazement jangled her nerves. Ferguson? Wait don't panic there's probably more than one person with that name. Meanwhile they don't know who I am! No comments about my parents no comments about why I had to leave AlphorUm. No one here knows me! She felt like laughing.

Meanwhile, the guy waved a hand toward her bag, waiting for her to give some kind of a response. His expression indicated that he expected her to scuttle off in fear. She suddenly remembered Mar key's words, and she felt her mother's icy smile curve her lips. "Take your own bag and yourself and jump in the bay," she said sweetly. "I'm going to Elenna."

The three guys howled with laughter and plopped down into the seats in front of her. She sat back, smiling to herself, and turned to look out the window at the line of workers still waiting to come on board.

Ordinarily she would have ignored talk around her, but after that exchange her attention was still partly on the man and his friends. When they spoke next, she listened, and after a few words she eavesdropped with growing interest.

"So what disaster have we got this time?" the blond guy said, laughing. "Paradise planet, no dangerous techno-labs to be put up, and no shortage on the roster don't tell me there isn't a catch."

"Not a thing, if you don't count monsters," the other guy responded promptly.

Philippa heard the distinctive sound of someone choking on a fresh mouthful of hot drink. "What?" Monsters?"

"Well, either that or someone doesn't want us to make quota on this one, much less margin. Remember the rumors about crumpled equipment and frameworks, back on Decair's World? What we've got is the same, only bigger. Smashed hoversleds, splintered bridge frames that kind of fun and games."

"Not here. Not us," the blond man groaned. "We're good, we're obedient this is the worst one yet! What do we do to deserve these things?"

His friend laughed. "If you ask old Ferguson and you somehow managed to catch him telling the truth he'd say it's because we're faster than his Blues. And if you're asking the Great Philosopher here, I'd say you probably earned it after spending fifty-four lifetimes enjoying unlicensed piracy. Hey, there's the light for 'belt up.' We're off to Elenna."

"She's glad to be going," Arkady's voice suddenly broke the long

silence that had built up.

Will looked over in surprise. He could barely see his best friend in the weak early-morning light. "You can read her? I sure don't get anything."

Arkady shook his head. "She's glad," he said quietly.

Both boys looked through the hovercraft's bubble at the flaring light of the aircar lifting off. They saw the rows of little yellow lights along the craft, then the aircar swung smoothly about and headed directly east.

Will shifted his length uncomfortably in the small vehicle. All these years of advanced technology and they still can't seem to design anything for anyone two meters tall.

Shoving those thoughts aside, Will turned to look at Arkady. As usual, Arkady's square jaw and light-colored eyes gave no clue to his inner thoughts. Will had also noticed that Arkady was not sending any emotional signals over the current when he was awake, that was.

When in doubt, be direct. That was his father's advice. "If you're regretting whatever it was that you two argued about the other night, send her a message," Will suggested. "And if she gets it and jumps up and down on it, cursing and gnashing her teeth, at least you won't be there to see it."

Arkady's mouth stretched in the first hint of a smile Will had seen in a long time. "I was an idiot to provoke her," he said. "She was already upset, what with her parents' great idea. But..." He stopped and shrugged. "I guess I'm not the kind to be part of a triangle."

"Triangle?" Will repeated, amazed. Philippa dating someone else?

"Yeah. Me, Philippa, and Miguel Arcaro," Arkady said grimly.

Sudden comprehension robbed Will of coherent thought or comment. "Uh," he said, then winced.

It seemed to be enough for Arkady. "So maybe it's good she's looking forward to a new beginning. I can do the same, and we won't be

tripping over each other's feet here in Ambora. Let's go," he added, starting up the hovercraft. "We've got school in a couple of hours. Let's get some breakfast."

CHAPTER FIVE

The City on Stilts

The flight was not long. Elenna lay on the eastern coast of the same small land mass as Ambora and Gandria, and nearly on the same latitude. Thus they had landed just as the sun rose and most people on either side of the continent were just beginning to stir and begin their day. It soon became apparent why they had landed so early: the workers were expected to put in a full day of work as soon as their gear was stashed.

"Greens! You've got that tent!" a tech announced through a voice amplifier as Philippa and her team trundled down the ramp. "Meal waiting, report to Site Forty-one in half an hour! Brown team! Your tent..."

Following the talking workers, Philippa felt lighthearted. A place to stay, food waiting, and no one knew who she was. Not having her past to weigh her down was a delightfully free sensation.

When the crowd of Greens arrived at the big silver dome of their "tent," the men and women automatically divided up. Philippa followed the women through one door, while the men went in through the other.

Inside, she looked around curiously. Three-meter-high silver partitions divided spaces off into cubicles, open on one side, in each of which three sets of double-decker bunks could be seen. Around Philippa women moved quickly, tossing gear onto bunks; she found that most beds had already been taken, and only the ones near the bathroom were free. Philippa threw her bag onto one and sat down.

The silver of the tent curved overhead. Behind her, a silver fabric wall stretched to the ceiling. This wall seemed to bisect the dome; the unseen half, judging from the low, muffled voices she could hear from the other side, housed the men of her team.

Air puffed gently against her face. It had that flat, sterile smell that indicated a very basic air-circulation system. Throughout the tent, women's voices clattered on a high note.

"Twenty minutes," someone yelled. "Eat the slop if you're going to, and line up. We're not going to start this one with lateness forfeits!"

Lateness forfeits? Sounds like school, Philippa thought as she stowed her bag on its shelf and wandered out into the open area.

Over at one side, a long refectory table was set with a huge serving

container. Philippa

made her way over, standing in the short line until she was able to grab a bowl and ladle out what she recognized with no enthusiasm as the nutritionally spiked but taste-dead -oatmeal that had been the most frequent breakfast choice when she first arrived on the planet. She realized now why so many people had been crowding back to the lounge on the aircar and grabbing the courtesy meals.

She'd gotten used to this stuff before, and she'd do so again.

She'd just swallowed about four bites when a hand whacked her shoulder, and she looked up into unfamiliar dark eyes. A short, sturdy woman with strong features and a thick braid of salt-and-pepper hair smiled at her while those dark eyes studied her ap-praisingly. "You the new Green?"

Philippa nodded.

"Eat fast." The woman pointed at Philippa's spoon, which she'd politely laid down. "I'll talk while you eat when we get the 'start' whistle, there won't be time." The woman's eyes narrowed slightly. "Done any construction before?"

Philippa nodded. "Family domes only."

"That's what we're building here. Good. I didn't think Markey would play us wrong, though you look mighty young. I'm Janith Guilamfi, co-leader of the Greens. The other leader is my husband, Arv, who rides herd on the clowns over there." She jerked a thumb back toward the men's half of the dome. "Only

team so run, but we think ours is the best. Competition, by the way, is serious the single goal many of our grunts have. So stick with your team, even if you hate 'em all, and don't believe anything the others say to you. And never, even if you're standing empty-handed and you see a pile of tools before you, touch any unless they're marked green. Got it?"

Philippa laid her spoon down again. Any appetite she'd had was gone. Janith glanced quickly at the huge chrono above the door, and went on quickly. "Here's the data. Stop me if you know any of this. We've got five cities to be readied for the next wave of newbies you know that term?"

"Colonists," Philippa said.

"Good. I tend to treat a new worker as if she's new to the planet, or things get assumed that should get explained. Anyway, the sites of these cities were not chosen for their beauty, or ease in construction, or anything relating to comfort: they all have natural harbors and are relatively near some important commodity that the P.L. has decided the planet will earn its setup credits by exporting. The timing of planet settlement is not decided by planetary planning committees, despite anything you may have heard" Janith's voice shaded into a sort of

grim-humor irony "but by some desk jockey on Earth who is trying to earn a promotion by proving that her, or his, theory on settlement logistics is the most cost effective." Philippa smiled, remembering the faint

distaste on Dr. Ives's austere countenance when he referred to these unknown people as "statistical theorists."

"So what this means for us is this: Usually, while the techies are still trying to prove that a site is relatively safe for both us and any native plants and animals, we're in there already building because the people and their baggage are already coming. The colonists, on signing the contract, were told that they'd have a home and job waiting. Which means they've got to find 'em waiting."

Philippa nodded. She'd heard much the same explanation, but from the techies' points of view, on her school fieldtrip to the volcanic Covisle archipelago half a year before. Strange, how it seemed ten years ago.

"All right, then. Five cities to be built, and nothing like what we'd consider proper time to get them built in. Still, we can't put up shoddy domes you heard about what happened in Ambora, not long after initial setup? One night" Janith snapped her fingers "ion storms ripped away the silanna don't worry about that here, since the problem's been solved but also, two groups' frames went down real fast. Big shake-ups, I can tell you!"

Philippa nodded, vaguely remembering a rumor floating around the Bradbury students doing drudge. What mostly interested her was Janith's assumption that Philippa had not been there: She knows nothing about me.

"Now, here's where you listen up good: If you think we give a flying fig for any Earther desk jockey's career or for those newbies coming in, for that matter you can get rid of that idea fast. What we've got our eyes on is what's called the margin. This is the extra number of domes above the quota that any team can put up, and the team that has the highest margin gets first choice on the next project."

Philippa said, "Which might be a choice between building in a broiling desert or polar icecap, and somewhere nice?"

Janith nodded soberly. "Or if there's a wait-phase built into the plans and we ship out, the difference between sweating it on some heavy-grav dump like Theta and a nice palace job on Felicidad."

"Wait-phase means time passing between new construction plans?"

Janith nodded. "Wasn't supposed to be one here on Gauguin, but we've got a rumor of some kind of problem. Somebody seemsto think one of the local critters talks and thinks, and though I suspect it's just the usual hot air you get from too many boring nights of sitting around in cheap starport dives, there are enough people talking about

it that we're assuming we might be shipped off-planet. No Green wants to go to Theta "

The buzzer sounded. "That's it!" Janith interrupted herself. "Let's get lined up fast. Any forfeits are taken off the margin."

Philippa flung her dishes into the recycler and followed Janith out. "'Talking critters.' Do you mean the quufers?" she asked cautiously. "Why don't you believe it?"

The other woman flung a humorous look back over her shoulder. "Because you just have to look at them. I might believe the little beasties with the teeth and long tails the ones that follow people around and chatter in mixed-up words are smart, depending on what you call smart," she added judiciously. "But those little pillows on legs that sound like birds? Scam time is what I think."

She laughed as they joined the people leaving the dome.

Directly overhead, Philippa heard the high, whining hum of a vertical-takeoff-and-land aircar. The Greens, men and women, rushed toward the veetol as it settled on its pods. Scarcely getting time to glance at her surroundings, Philippa followed her teammates. With long-practiced haste, the team piled in, squeezing to make room; Philippa jumped in after Janith. The last person was just closing the door as the veetol lifted quite suddenly. a

Philippa felt her stomach drop, and braced herself. Janith didn't seem to notice the rapid ascent. Over the sound of voices and conversation, she said to Philippa, "Here's your unit partner." The older woman leaned forward and whacked the shoulder of a small person on the bench ahead. "Kay? Philippa here is your new partner."

Philippa found herself gazed at by wide gray eyes in a pointed face. Kay was not much older than Philippa, and she was about the same height. Kay's long gaze went from Philippa's snow-white hair to her long, thin feet, then the finely plucked brows lifted just a bit. "I hope you're fast" was the only comment, and Kay promptly turned around again and resumed her low-voiced conversation.

Janith had been pulled into an earnest discussion about supplies with the people on the bench in back; Philippa turned to the window and looked out over the site.

What she saw took her by surprise. From her window on the aircar coming in, she'd only seen the deep blue of ocean and a glimpse of a long pier. Now she saw that the entire site was built on platforms that surmounted sandy keys at the mouth of a huge river. The veetol carried them south, inland. There Philippa got another surprise when she saw that the platforms, high as they were (maybe ten meters from the ground or water), were well beneath the branches of the biggest trees she'd ever seen in her life. Mighty silver-brown branches intertwined, hiding some of the platforms from view; as the veetol

dropped lower and landed in a space between trees, she saw massive, thick trunks.

"Wow!" a man said, looking around. "Amazing!"

"Hope there's nothing crawling in those damn trees," a voice muttered just behind Philippa. "I don't like these rumors I'm hearing about smash-ups." The speaker was Kay, who was supposed to be Philippa's work partner.

She was interrupted by a tall man who moved among them, clapping his hands. "Let's get to work! This is Site Forty-one. The good news: it's all domestic structures. The bad news: we have fifty-five to put up before we hit margin!"

Howls and curses greeted the man's words, and the workers began moving purposefully toward the supply hoversleds. Philippa hung back, wondering what she was supposed to do. She knew what high-wiring was, but there were as yet no housing forms to wire.

Philippa looked around for Janith, and caught sight of her speaking to Kay. Kay's shoulders tightened and her shiny dark ponytail bobbed; then she gave a short nod, and turned toward Philippa.

"Come on!" she called with a hint of impatience. "Today we run wire coils out to the framers. Saves time!"

Without waiting to see if Philippa followed, the girl strode as quickly toward one of the sleds.

That was the last "quiet" moment of what turned out to be a very long day. Unlike drudge, which was strictly regulated according to established shift times, these workers kept right at it until it was too dark to see anything. By then Philippa's back ached from bending and lifting countless coils of heavy frame wire and wrestling with the controls of

an ancient, out-of-adjustment hoversled. Worse, her hands and feet were numb from cold, as the temperature had dropped rapidly along with the sun.

She was wondering if she'd collapse and disgrace herself when she finally heard the welcome sound of the veetol returning for the team. A ragged cheer went up from some of the other workers, and then a bearded man bounded briskly into the lights of the landing vehicle, and shouted, "Tomorrow you'll make up for lazing off today! Ferguson'd just love to see how little you slackers got done!"

Ferguson. As Philippa limped to the boarding ramp, she thought, I'll keep wondering and worrying until I ask. It just can't be Mother's wonderful H.L. Ferguson. No one deserves that kind of had luck. Just as she was about to go up the ramp into the veetol, she felt a hard jab on her arm. "Just where do you think you're going?" Kay exclaimed impatiently.

Philippa's tongue wouldn't work. She lifted a hand tiredly, pointing

to the veetol, and the other girl said, "Who do you think is going to drive these sleds back tonight? Not the framers they worked today! Come on! I've got plans tonight, and I'm not going to be late while you get lost! Now stay close, and keep the lights on high. They said nothing ever hits moving things."

"What's this about " Philippa started to ask, but Kay cut het off saying, "Come on, grab a sled and don't keep us waiting!"

Philippa did as she was told and found herself in a sled, trailing the one that Kay was in. They began riding back across what seemed to be miles of ghostly lit flat platforms.

The stars were out and only the beams of her sled were lighting the way before her when Philippa heard the crashing of sea-water below, which meant they'd reached the shoreline. One sharp turn, and they drove into a city of huge silver fabric tents. Glad not to have to navigate for herself, Philippa followed the others until they came to a cavernous makeshift shed. There, Kay jumped off with astounding energy, exchanged flirtatious remarks with the guys in the shed, and bounded off toward one of the tents. The others followed more slowly.

Philippa fell in next to a yawning woman with long perma-dyed, green-streaked hair. "I have a couple of questions," she said politely.

The woman looked over and grinned in the middle of her yawn. "You're the new wirer, aren't you? What's up?" She laughed suddenly. "No, let me guess. You've been hearing about monsters, right? Stamping the platforms, eating finished domes, and killing workers right and left?"

Philippa shrugged, feeling a little foolish.

The woman grinned. "Every planet we go to seems to have some kind of weird rumor,

and I think most of 'em get started by the Blues, who'll do anything to rattle us. I don't believe in any monster till I see it. That all?"

"No. My second question is, who's this Ferguson person I've heard mentioned?"

The woman chuckled, then yawned. "You must have heard him talking 'cause you sure got him pegged talks real finicky, our new project director does."

Philippa's insides tightened. "You don't know his first name?" she asked carefully.

The woman yawned again as they went in through the tent door. "Got a couple of names. Liverall is one, I think, and the other is Haffnor. Something like that. The boys call him Fungusnose, but we think he's kind of cute." Laughing comfortably, the woman moved away toward the other side of the tent.

Philippa moved with lagging steps toward

her bunk. "Got him pegged," nothing I was

just talking normally. Alphorion accent, just
like that used by my parents' dear friend,
Haffnor Liverwell Ferguson. x

Repressing a heartfelt groan, Philippa reminded herself that there was a big difference in her own status now. She wouldn't be seeing the man at any parties; she was now one of the delta-class workers, of the sort no decent alpha ever bothered to take notice of. He might be in charge of this project, but maybe she'd never have to see him.

Trying to cheer herself with this thought, Philippa made herself stand in line for a hot shower, then made herself stand in line again

to get a bowl of the hot "slop," as everyone called it. She willed her jaw to move and her throat to swallow, then at last she had only the walk to her bunk.

She fell into bed. Rolled under the covers. Noticed that one of the other women in the cubicle snored, and that the light from the bathroom flashed across her bed every time someone opened the door. Then she closed her eyes and heard the faint, soft Kwoo! Kwoo! of a quufer. It was calling her, she could feel it. She rolled over, shielded her mind, and closed her eyes.

Five seconds later, a bell shrieked.

"Rise, shine, and get movingl" someone called.

CHAPTER SIX

Time Out

The next couple of weeks were much like the first. Philippa began wiring the frameworks the next day, but soon found that what Kay really needed her for was to pitch up the coils of wire and bring them to her, or carry away the excess while Kay expertly swung across the fragile constructions.

The partnership was not exactly on the level of friendship; Kay had begun calling Philippa "Worm," because of all that pale skin and hair, a name that was promptly pickedˆ up by the others in their unit. Philippa discovered that she was not the only one with an unfortunate nickname. The nicknames were meant as jokes, for the most part; meanwhile, Philippa was just as happy to have a name that no one would recognize. Haffnor Liverwell Ferguson, for instance, would never turn his alpha-class Alphorionite head if he heard Kay yell out "Worm!"

By listening when others talked, Philippa found out that there were two main city plans currently in favor with Those on High, and both had been altered and improved by Alison Matthews, Sean's mother. Philippa felt peculiar the first time she glanced at the flimsy-printout copy of a domeplan and saw A.M. neatly printed in the corner, next to the Standard date.

It was strange to think of the woman everyone here respected but had never seen being the mother of someone Philippa had dated; but Philippa didn't want to think about Ambora, or her life there.

Philippa usually ended each day too tired to think at all. The talk of monsters had subsided. No one had seen or heard anything since the Greens' arrival, and meanwhile the all-important race for margin occupied everyone's energy. This suited Philippa fine.

Things changed very abruptly one morning.

"Hey, Worm! Stop sleeping and grab us some more joiners!" Kay yelled over her shoulder as she freed her lead and attached it to another part of the framework high overhead, then swung one-handed to the new location.

Philippa climbed onto the heavy hoversleds used by the team, and drove down the narrow platform to the supply tent. On either side,

strange, dark-trunked trees stretched their smooth branches high overhead. Along the twigs, silvery green buds had popped out, just in the last day or so.

At the tent, one of the other Greens impatiently forced his overloaded sled around, nearly dumping his pile of equipment. "Who or should I say, what designed these wrecks?"

"Somebody who didn't have to drive 'em," the man in the supply tent boomed, handing Philippa her supplies.

Philippa watched the man on the hoversled swerve around a corner and disappear down another platform. For a moment she'd been on the verge of saying "Arkady and I have figured an easy way to adjust the turning radius on these sleds," but she kept quiet and simply returned to the new domes with her supplies. Why get into an explanation of who Arkady was, and where she'd learned about tinkering with hardware?

"I'm waiting!" Kay greeted her as she wove her way carefully among the silvery frames of domes-to-be.

Philippa handed up the supplies, then turned to see what else she could d6, and became aware of splashing sounds below the platform. She walked to the edge, peering over carefully, and saw a long green shape swim sinuously among the thick tangle of tree roots, and splash into the river water. A few bubbles appeared, then the creature was gone. It's real, she thought, wondering vaguely why she wasn't panicking. There is something here.

Philippa lifted her eyes, scanning the platforms winding away under the trees. Wisps

of fog obscured the farther platforms; the fog seemed to be coming in earlier each day. Along one of the farther platforms, she saw two or three tiny shapes scuttling quufers.

"Strange, eh?"

Philippa looked up to find Arv, Janith's husband, standing next to her. The huge man stood with his hands on his hips, squinting up at the trees. As Philippa nodded slowly, he went on, "I've helped to build more than thirty cities, on nearly as many worlds, each one on ground new to humans. Half the time the bio teams are still finishing up okaying the place." He stopped and squinted down at the silently flowing waters below.

"Supposedly we'll fit into the local ecosystem without much undue disturbance," said a new voice Janith's. She walked up and stood on Philippa's other side. "Supposedly we'll not take any harm, either." She looked over at her husband. "What're you thinking, Arv?"

He shook his head, then stroked his beard slowly. "Hope Elenna tells us her secrets before Ferguson gets here." He strode away.

Janith smiled after him. "He claims to have a head of stone, but

somehow he always knows things, before they happen." Then she gave Philippa her usual friendly whack on the shoulder. "Come on. Time to get those lower levels wired Kay's on to the next row."

Philippa followed in time to hear Kay yelling, "Come on, Worm! Get going!"

Worm. Well, anything's better than Philippa Bidding, she thought, reaching for a coil of wire then freezing as Kay gave a startled exclamation.

Philippa looked up; all the workers stared, immobile, as a huge shape loomed high above the platform, nearly but not quite enshrouded by the fog. No outline or even color could be seen. Philippa stared, her heart hammering painfully. Somehow, when she'd seen the movement in the water before she hadn't thought the creature would be this big. The rumors were true. It was some kind of monster.

No one spoke or moved. For a long moment the shadow seemed frozen as well as the workers, then they heard a mighty surging and splashing of water, and the shadow faded beyond the opaque white curtain of swirlingfog.

Ambora: morning.

Arkady tightened his insides against a sudden swerving as Sean slapped the pilot's controls. Looking through the screen, he was astounded to see three lethally streamlined shapes power up over the moon's horizon, flying in deadly formation.

"Look out!" he croaked through a dry throat.

"Evasive action hang on!" Sean cried. Gravity pressed them back in their seats as the screen showed the moon dropping rapidly away, and stars streaming overhead. Then the

screen went bright with actinic light, and a tremor ran through the seats. "They're firing!" Arkady shouted. "They're "

"Disengage, please, boys."

The voice seemed to come from nowhere, then Arkady remembered that he was not in an intrasystem craft, flying over Theta's moon, but in the new flight simulator recently brought to Bradbury School through the good offices of retired Planetary League Commander Yamoto.

Arkady swallowed a couple of times as he pulled off the holovid helmet and special gloves. He remembered yelling, and was just beginning to feel a twinge of embarrassment when he caught sight of Sean's face. A sheen of sweat above Sean's green eyes showed that he was feeling the same surge of adrenaline.

Sean met his eyes and shook his head. "Don't tell me."

"Moon. Over Theta. Some kind of assault craft."

Sean groaned. "I said not to tell me! I saw three destroyers coming

up over Earth."

They ducked through the door at the back of the simulator machine, and met the frowning eyes of the teacher in charge. "The program, I assure you, offered three merchant-class vessels, and you were only to alter your course and pass them by. This machine is technically capable of taking the kinds of stresses you were placing on it, but if you boys are going to get wild on a routine program..."

Sean shook his head slowly.

The teacher's brows rose. "What did you see?"

Sean and Arkady both spoke at once. "We were fired on " "Attacked by " They stopped and grinned at each other.

"All right. That does it," the teacher said, closing the unit and palming the lock. "Ion-storm nightmares. Seems to get worse wherever people and electricity are gathered together in a confined space. The simulator is hereby closed down until after this season's over."

Sean groaned. "But, Dr. Forbes "

"Forget it, Sean." The older man grinned. "This is the second time today someone's given that thing a rough ride."

Sean sighed. "It was so real."

"And you enjoyed being under attack. Good practice for school," the teacher joked as he locked the lab. "Call me hardhearted."

Arkady felt relief wash through him, but he said nothing as they left the Research Dome. Arkady could sympathize: he knew that the flying lessons meant a lot to Sean. Arkady was interested, but not nearly as much; he'd agreed to go in as Sean's partner mainly because Philippa, who'd been taking the course with Sean, was now gone and the other kids in the small class all had partners.

Sean continued to complain until they stepped onto the sky walk above the thundering falls. A hot, static-charged wind stirred their hair. Arkady felt his eyes beginning to itch as he squinted against the fierce, scoured-blue sunlight. "Wonder how long this'll last," Sean said as they ducked through the entrance to their favorite hangout, the Greendome eaterie near the education complex.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better," a voice announced cheerfully behind them.

Arkady looked up to find Zach and Will bearing down on them. "Noriko got stuck with extra drudge at the tidal generator, in case we have power problems," Will reported, answering Sean's unasked question.

"Another windstorm expected tonight?" Arkady asked as he ordered a citrus cooler.

Zach and Will nodded together. Will went on: "Daphne is helping her father with the holovid equipment. They're running all kinds of tests. Seems some people get the weird visions interrupting the tapes

in crazily random occurrences."

"Like the visions we saw last time there were ion storms," Sean said. And like the visions Arkady and I saw today

"This time it's more people than just us," Zach said. "You know, I always thought the visions were connected to the current, but this time it's mostly kids who are reporting them. Do you think they'll be hearing the current next?"

"I don't know what to think," Sean said, rubbing hjs eyes. "I've tried to ask the quufers,

but it means going to their City of the Mind, and I can't seem to find it. It's like there's radio interference, if that makes any sense."

"Nothing about the current makes any sense," Zach said with a laugh.

Zach went on talking about the complaints people were bringing to the Med Dome, making some of it sound funny. Sean just sat brooding tiredly over his drink as Will followed Zach's stories with the crazy things people were complaining about seeing on the holovids. Arkady sat silently, staring at his drink. They knew about his nightmares, he realized with a sinking sensation. Everyone in the current knew. Finishing his drink quickly, he excused himself, explaining that he had to pick up his sisters from school.

Tb his surprise, Sean offered to go out with

him. As soon as they were alone on the skywalk Sean turned to him, his green eyes con

cerned, and said, "Want me to go to Elenna

and talk to Philippa?" x

Arkady's first reaction was a spurt of annoyance. He hid it, of course. "No, thank you," he said in a neutral voice.

"Right," Sean said. "See you later." He walked off.

Arkady also left, glad to have the excuse to get away. He found Tisa and Sallin waiting impatiently when he drove up in the family's hovercraft, and he hardly listened to them as they climbed in, both talking busily. Tisa had to ask him twice if he'd heard her say that the fiber optics people were shutting down early,

and would he stop by and pick up Mom after dropping them at the Greendome for drudge?

He was halfway home from this second errand when his mother said, "Arkady, your father is tired. This weather is not good for his breathing, and he has put in too many hours with the Scout prototype." Arkady forced himself to turn and look at his mother. Like most Thetans, if she brought something up, it was not to make conversation, but for a reason.

"I've helped him as much as he'd let me," Arkady said.

Natasha Davidov smiled and reached over to brush his hair off his

forehead. "I know. He's quite pleased with some of your suggestions. I was hoping you would volunteer to take it and test it for him. Apparently this weather is creating enough problems with the city's robotics that he cannot go, or send either of his chief assistants. You know this prototype as well as any of the three of them. Getting permission for you to go would be very easy."

Arkady frowned in puzzlement. "We have been testing it."

"The tests in the new city, for which it was designed. It must be tested in the canals before they can build the other Scouts."

Arkady opened his mouth to agree, then remembered what city had the canals and who was there. "I've got a lot to do for school," he hedged. "It'd take a couple of weeks to get it there, and a couple more for the tests."

His mother pursed her lips and nodded as they drew up in front of their home. "I see. Very well."

She said nothing more as Arkady followed her inside but went straight to the south wall of the dome to tend her huge indoor garden. Arkady, looking in on her a little later, saw her smiling and humming as she tended the plants she hadn't been able to grow on bleak, heavy-gravity Theta.

After dinner, Arkady went back to his room to study. His sisters had gone off to a dance sponsored by the school. Will called, offering to pick him up, but Arkady begged off, claiming overdue homework.

Then he turned on his desk computer, keying up a self-directed study sequence in star-system navigation he'd signed up for, The screen winked, then green letters and numbers flowed across it, picking up from where Arkady had left off last time. Arkady studied the complicated course requirements and reviewed the hypothetical specs on the fleet he'd invented at the start of this exercise, then he pulled his calculator over and began entering numbers. He found it mentally soothing to perform the calculations himself.

His fingers danced over the keypad, and he glanced up at the screen and saw those three assault craft rising rapidly over the bleak, iron-gray horizon of Theta, bearing down fast. Arkady sat, frozen, until the lead ship was so close he could see into its viewscreen. There at the controls sat Miguel Arcaro,

green eyes triumphant and mouth soundlessly laughing. Arkady blinked, and the screen glowed quietly with green numbers. He swept his hand across the toggle switch, killing the power.

"Arkady? Arkady?" Will's thought-call came over the mental current, colored with worry.

"I'm all right," Arkady sent the thought back to his friend.

A moment later, his comm-link glowed. He almost ignored it, but then he sank back in his seat and hit the switch. Will's wide face came

onscreen, his dark eyes searching. "Arkady "

"I'm all right," Arkady said.

"No you're not," Will came back bluntly. "I mean, your health is fine, but well, you know what the problem is."

Arkady swallowed, his mind replaying the eerie vision of Philippa's dead Alphorionite revolutionary. She either left her Miguel ghost behind or I've made one for myself. Time to stop running. He nodded, smiling a little. "There seems to be a conspiracy going on to get me sent off to Elenna. Maybe I should cooperate."

Will's bony face changed to a sheepish grin, then he shrugged. "It's just that it's not doing any good to sit around here and pretend nothing's bothering you. Sean did say he'd go, if you like."

"No, I'll do it," Arkady said.

Will's eyes narrowed. "You Thetans! Is that 'No, he can keep his nose out of my business,' or 'No, I think I should handle it'?"

Arkady rubbed his thumb along the hard, smooth edge of his desk as he thought. On a planet like Theta where even talking required extra effort, getting along with one another was of prime importance. Unlike people from cultured, decorative Alphorion, where politeness was as often as not used as a weapon, it took a great deal to make a Thetan say or do anything rude or unconsidered. This tended to develop citizens who did not say or reveal much.

"I should be able to talk to Philippa as well as Sean can," Arkady said finally.

Will laughed and signed off.

When Arkady walked noiselessly into his father's workshop, he spotted Mr. Davidov's strong, square figure bent over the console of the prototype. His father spoke without turning around: "Get a card of air-system switches, Arkady?" Without speaking, Arkady went over to the long tool rack and picked up the implement his father needed. He took it over, handed it to his father, and watched as Mr. Davidov delicately replaced a tiny part deep inside the compact power console of the prototype. When he was done, the older man stood up and brushed his fingers on his boorman, silently regarding the two-meter-high, clam-shaped craft.

"I think it's ready," he said slowly, nodding with quiet satisfaction.

"High-pressure system working now?" Arkady asked.

"Yes. It'll function down to one thousand meters, which is twice what they'll ever need," Mr. Davidov replied. "Time for it to go to Elenna and test the waters of its new home." He hesitated. "Commander Yamoto is concerned about the power sources in case the winds worsen. He's asked me to remain."

"I'll go with it," Arkady said. "I've done the tests often enough here in the bay."

His father glanced over quickly. "I thought you would not want to go to Elenna," he said.

Arkady shrugged. "You're needed here. I'm not. Besides ..." He shrugged again.

Mr. Davidov smiled suddenly. "From what the commander told me I gather his son thinks you would be happier away from the stress effects of these winds. Both of them have suggested you as a good person to send on the test run."

"Zach hopes I'll patch up things with Philippa," Arkady said. "I guess I need to talk to her if she'll talk."

Mr. Davidov stood silently for a long time, his eyes ranging over the waiting lights on the Scout's console, then he said, "It will be hard if I've been wrong in modifying this machine for our purposes and the Scout fails, but it is still better to know. There is a transport ship leaving in two days."

Arkady nodded, catching his father's double message. "I'll be ready," he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On the High Seas

"I shall certainly take this up with the Planning Committee!" Mr. Ferguson declared, his Alphorionite accent not only out of place in the fledgling city, but jarring the listening Philippa with uncomfortable associations of "home."

"There's a creature out there doing serious damage," a man called from the crowd of listening Greens. "Next time, it might be us."

"Yeah," a woman chimed in. "Maybe we should do the bio checks for dangerous lifeforms next time, and let the bio teams try putting up buildings with stomped supplies."

H.L. Ferguson smiled broadly, and Philippa, hovering on the edge of the crowd, thought Uh-oh here comes a zinger! The man's voice cut smoothly through the angry voices of the crowd: "I'll report everything you've told me, plus your evidence." He

pointed at the smashed temporary supply tent the Greens had found when they arrived at the site that morning. "But the first things they'll ask for are witnesses and descriptions of the culprit... and on not getting any" the cold smile broadened for a moment "they might be forgiven for wondering if there might not be, ah, some practical jokers among you."

Ignoring the murmur of outrage that arose, Ferguson waved a languid hand. "Meanwhile, the day is progressing, isn't it? And I know other teams are hard at work." He sat down on his powerful, shield-protected official vehicle and sped off.

Philippa turned to Kay and said, "Going for more line."

Kay barely looked at her; her attention was on an argument between two unit leaders debating whether they should risk quitting, or risk staying on the job. "Another thing!" Philippa heard Kay's high voice rise above the others. "Pretty slimy, to hint we sabotaged that shed. If anything human did it, it was his Blues! If you can call them human!"

Philippa got on her hoversled and whipped it around in a tight U. She zipped down one platform toward the big supply tents back at the home base. Once away from the others, she increased her speed, driving swiftly but carefully between a double row of houses now

"growing" their silanna skin.

As she glanced at the passing domes, their acceptor trays plugged into neat rows of dry-processed silanna containers, she had a sudden memory-image of Clea Tburni. Clea's soft topaz eyes never failed to gleam with pleasure when she watched the silanna grow over a framework, changing a bunch of bent wiring into a house. For a moment Philippa allowed her eyes to roam over the warm browns and subtle bronzes of the silanna walls, seeing them as Clea did. She realized she missed Clea, her first and only female friend.

I wish she were here. I wish Arkady ... No. He Said good-bye.

She wrested her mind back to the present.

Speaking of which, what was that toroid Ferguson doing, nosing around the Green team so often? Philippa frowned with annoyance as she realized that since he'd arrived four days before, he'd been around at least once each work session.

The hoversled bucked slightly, recalling her attention to what she was doing. The platform beneath the pressor beam swayed slightly, and creaks filled the foggy air. Philippa fought a sharp pang of warning as water sloshed over the edge of the platform, spilling in a wide puddle then sinking through tiny holes in the planking.

That was another thing: the river had been steadily rising. The problem was, the bio teams had promised that the maximum the river would rise was eight meters, and the platforms had been built four meters higher for a safety margin. This morning, the measure indicated the river was at ten meters and still rising.

Phillppa pulled up at the supply shed, repressing her automatic feelings of disgust when she saw a quufer sitting on the counter, being petted by Terrin, the supply clerk.

A bio tech, identifiable by her light-colored boorman and the portable computer tucked under her arm, was leaning against the other side of the counter, talking to Terrin. As Philippa quietly approached, she saw the tech cast a worried look beyond the edge of the wet platform and shake her head.

"Damn water!" she said. "Was supposed to have peaked days ago." Terrin, a handsome, dark-haired guy, gave a crack of laughter. "It's never what you expect. I'm surprised we don't have fanged devil snakes dropping out of these trees on us right now!" He pantomimed ducking from something as he cast a fearful look at the giant branches intertwining overhead.

The tech sighed. "Very funny." She reached absently to stroke the quufer. "It's not your butts going to be on the line if we have to evacuate you builders and scratch the city."

"What?" Terrin's grin faded. "The platforms won't hold, or are the stompers for real?"

The tech smiled grimly. "We're trying as hard as Ferguson will allow us to find out about the stompers. As for the platforms, they'll hold. These things were brought in intended for Ambora didn't you know it was originally supposed to be built out in the bay,

so we wouldn't risk contaminating the land with our presence?"

Terrin snorted. "And a big city over the water wouldn't contaminate the water?"

The tech said, "That was the bright idea of some geo-eco dreamer back on Earth. Oceans are not his specialty. Anyway, by the time someone had convinced him that landing on a planet exposes the place to ecological changes, but that the idea in settling the planets was to get along with the native flora and fauna, we were here, and the prefab supplies were circling around overhead. I suspect someone on the Planning Committee was just dying to pull off a coup by utilizing the otherwise 'wasted materials' since they put Ambora on land after all. Thus we have El-enna, City on Stilts."

"And we tell the newbies everything's so well planned, coordinated and calculated!" Terrin grinned down at the quufer. "What do you critters think of our city? Fun to run around on?"

The tech sighed. "That's another problem somebody in Ambora now insists these creatures are sentient. Luckily, my team hasn't been handed that one to figure out." She turned her gaze over the grayish, swirling water, visible for maybe twenty meters in the thick fog of midafternoon. "Weird. The marks on the tree-boles everything! indicated the tides rise a max of eight. Anyway, to your question: the platforms will stand, no problem. We may just find ourselves a couple of meters under water."

"Evacuation would look bad for Ferguson." The clerk shook his head. "He won't want to do it until it's too late."

"By which time he will have figured a way to place the blame on us," the tech said with a very ironic look. "That's why he's a politician and we're just lowly scientists, trying to do our jobs despite stupidly restrictive orders." She seemed to notice Philippa standing there, and flipped up a hand quickly. "Well, back to water measurement. Catch you later." She walked off quickly.

Philippa watched her go, knowing there was a lot she could tell her about the quufers. She transferred her gaze to the small creature with its soft, hairy scales. The quufer's "hair" was now a deep orange color, which Philippa knew indicated pleasure. The quufers liked being petted, and they responded as well to human laughter and warmth.

And if it sensed danger, it would be pale green, Philippa realized suddenly.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the clerk. "Never seen one

before?" he inquired, indicating the quufer.

Philippa looked up, smiling politely. "Once or twice," she said. "Here's what I need: twenty-five coils of eight-gauge ..."

Far to the south, the afternoon sun shone with benign blue intensity. Arkady paused in his climb up the mainmast ratlines and, fingers

and toes clinging to the tarred rope, glanced back down.

The deck of the wind-driven four master Faucon-de-la-Bee seemed very far below him. Arkady remained still, feeling the slow roll of the long, clean-lined ship beneath him, and the strong ruffle of the ocean breeze through his hair and clothes. He closed his eyes a moment and breathed deeply. This is even better than deep-sea diving, he thought contentedly.

With a surge of his powerful muscles, he pulled himself rapidly the rest of the way up the ratlines and stepped onto the narrow platform called the crosstree. He saw the crew member on duty feel the vibration of his feet on the floor; her billed cap swung around. Dark brown eyes glanced at him briefly, then returned to the small console as she finished tapping in a series of numbers.

"You again!" she said at last. "Don't you get tired of climbing up here?" Her gaze\shifted to Arkady's strongly muscled body, then she laughed and added, "No, I guess you wouldn't. Anyway, let me guess: you come from a planet with no ocean?"

Arkady joined her at the console, looking out at the far horizon. "Theta has water, but jumping into it would be like jumping into wet cement," he answered. "When will we be picking up speed again?"

"Speed? We're making a good eight knots!" She winked. "That's good enough while we maneuver through all these little islands and

reefs down here. Soon as we pass the eastern peninsula, we'll head north at full speed again."

Arkady nodded in satisfaction. "That will be good."

"That is, if the weather permits," she added. "You in a big hurry to get to Elenna with that nifty little ocean runabout of yours down in the hold?"

Arkady held his smile as he transferred his gaze to the forest of black mylar sails snapping and belling in the breeze around him. There was always that slight feeling of anticipatory dread inside him when he remembered where he was going; he much preferred to think about how much he was enjoying the journey. "I like the speed," he said. "I wish we were going much farther, in fact."

"You certainly got your balance fast enough." The crewperson nodded. "But if you've already adjusted to different gravity once, I suppose travel on the high seas wouldn't seem such a big thing."

"Meanwhile," Arkady said, smiling, "there's so much to be learned

about sailing. Such as, why a person must be up here at all, when there must be computer sensors already positioned here that can perform measures and sightings much faster and more accurately."

"I thought there must be an ulterior motive!" she laughed. "Well, it's not like there's much else to do, so let me give you a rundown on the lookout's job. Now, to your question,

have you ever heard the term 'backing up the backup'?"

That night in Elenna, Philippa leaned against the rail and stared down into the inky sea-water. The ever-present fog shrouded all but the closest of the huge trees and the platforms beneath them; here and there faint yellow lights glowed in the thick haze with ghostly effect. Sound was tricky: most of the time it was quiet except for the continuous slap-slap of the water against the pylons; occasionally she heard snatches of conversations. The speakers could not be seen, which made the atmosphere seem even more ghostly.

Philippa rubbed her hands along her
sleeves, sniffing the air. Fog smelled different
here than it had in Alphorion. The wet smell
was definitely there, of course, but under it
was . . . what? Wood? No, something almost
sweet. Blossoms? \

She sniffed again, her eyes traveling over the restless floodwaters. It was late, but she wasn't sleepy. For three nights she'd tossed and turned wakefully on her bunk, hearing all the noises in the tent as unnaturally loud, until finally she'd drop off. Tbnight she had not even tried to turn in at her usual early hour.

I've gotten used to the work, she thought without any pleasure.

A sudden pang squeezed her heart. I miss my friends! I miss Arkady. That was followed

by the leaden ache that always accompanied memory of all her mistakes. She folded her forearms on the rail and leaned her forehead against them. I'm alone because I chose to be, but it isn't making anything any better.

For the first time since she left Ambora she felt a powerful urge to reach along the current and see if she could contact the others. Then she remembered who else tapped into that current .... And at the same time she heard the tiny tapping of quufer feet on the platform planking. Anger made her shudder. Let's not give the quufers another entertaining installment of "Philippa and her Foul-ups, "shall we?

Turning around, she gazed into the fog, trying to spot the little creatures. The glimpse she caught reminded her of the conversation she'd overhead earlier, between the tech and the supply clerk. That brought up another problem: should she point out that the quufers were indeed intelligent and that they would not be hanging around

on the platform if they felt imminent danger?

If I tell anyone, they're going to ask a million questions. But if I don't, and they decide to evacuate the city, then am I at fault? And what if the quufers really aren't able to predict the safety of something we humans have built? Meanwhile, even if the platforms are fine, what about those creatures? In spite of what anyone says, Kay and the rest of us saw something that morning!

A possible solution occurred: she could attempt to communicate with the quufers, and ask them. But at the thought of them trespassing in her mind again, she felt cold nausea grip her insides. Never. Besides, who knew if they all communicated over the current, anyway?

She lifted her head, lacing her fingers together tightly. All I know is, despite everything going on here, I don't want to go back home. She thought of her parents, and their coldly perfect dome. I can't face them again. It'll just be another round of the same old nastiness, with me the loser. She heard again the anger and hurt in her last exchange with Arkady, "Goodbye and good life." And underneath, a deeper pain, accompanying an unwanted memory image of Dr. Ives draping a flag over Miguel Arcaro's coffin.

She turned and walked quickly back toward light and voices. Forget the quufers. Nobody was going to spy into her mind again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Green Is for Go!

"Ferguson'll make the decision about evacuation either tonight or tomorrow," Janith addressed the assembled Green team.

A chorus of groans and curses met her words. Janith just shook her head slowly, the thick fog making strands escaping from her thick braid curl over her brow.

"So what do we do? Stop work?" a voice from the crowd yelled.

Arv, who had been standing silently behind his wife as she outlined the situation, answered. "We vote. No orders have come down; the Yellows are still building on the hy-drogenerator, but the Browns have been sent back from the docks."

Janith continued, "The Blues are voting this morning as well, but as we've all noted, Ferguson's got them assigned to the coastal sections, where there haven't been any critter-stompings. Anyway, here are our options: If

we stop and the clear-out signal comes, we haven't lost any more than we've already put into this project. If we don't clear out, then we'll have lost the time we waited. If we go ahead and work and the clear-out comes, then all the supplies we used will look bad on the tally sheets."

"It shouldn't be that way," Kay said angrily. "It's not our fault if they scratch the project."

"But it's true. You don't think Ferguson will take the rap alone for all the wasted supplies, do you?" Janith asked grimly.

Voices broke out laughing, commenting, arguing. Philippa listened, her inner tension increasing. All very well to decide she wasn't going to do anything, but as she listened to the people around her, she felt all her questions 6f the night before come rushing back.

"Are these platforms going to stay up?" A man near the front began. He broke off when the platform trembled slightly, and a wave of brownish water broke over the edge and swirled down the planking toward them. A murmur swelled through the crowd, echoing the water's movement. As the water sank through the planking, leaving a gleaming dark expanse, Philippa noticed a small group of quufers moving along the adjacent platform.

Is it my imagination, or are there more of them than ever? She stared after the little figures, until their orange-colored "hair" disappeared into the mist.

The same man called, "The techs say the platforms'll stand, but they also said the tide would top out at eight meters."

Through the outbreak of loud comments this caused, Janith made her last announcement. "You've got all breakfast time to mull this over. We'll call for the vote right after." The Greens dispersed slowly, everyone talking. Philippa started away; she saw another quufer sitting on a supply crate, and abruptly made a decision. Maybe there's a way. She hovered on the edge of the crowds going into the tent.

Janith cast her a preoccupied smile. "Hi there, kid. Sorry this might be a very short job."

Philippa swallowed in a very dry throat. "In Ambora " She stopped.

Janith looked at her, brows knit.

"Janith! Janith!" two voices called nearby.

Janith glanced up, her attention focusing away, and Philippa said in a rush, "The quufers haven't left, and their coats haven't turned green. I think it means there's no danger."

Janith waved distractedly at the others, turning to study Philippa. "How do you know that?" she asked directly.

"It was well-known in Ambora," Philippa started.

"Not by me," Janith responded, still neutrally.

Philippa felt a huge pit opening before her, boiling with all those questions she did not want to answer. She shook her head. "I was

in school before I came here," she tried. "The teachers told us."

Janith snorted, her eyes still steady on Philippa's. "So the next question is, why didn't you bring this up in front of the others?" As Philippa's lips parted slowly, Janith murmured, "Personal reasons, obviously, but do they have to do with your faith in your information, or with something else?"

"Something else," Philippa managed through a very dry throat.

Janith nodded. "So that leaves us with two more choices: If those critters are really intelligent, then they'd know danger if they saw it. And if not, then orange coats or green coats, we'd be idiots to follow them. So which is it?"

Philippa forced her tongue to move. "I think... they know," she said softly.

Janith's eyes had narrowed until they were uncomfortably piercing, as if she were trying to listen in on that damned mental current. Suddenly she let out an explosive sigh. "I think old Arv is right there are more secrets here than the techs have accounted for. Am I right?" As if in answer, another wave splashed over the platform

nearby, sending water rilling over their shoes. Both Philippa and Janith turned to look out at the opaque waters just a meter below the level of the platform. Janith shook her head and marched inside the tent. "Let's eat," she said.

Half an hour later, the Greens heard their signal to assemble. Philippa followed the group out, staying well to the back. A few

moments later Arv shouted for silence, and the Greens fell quiet.

"One last piece of information has come to my attention," Janith began. "Apparently, the techies in Ambora have observed that these critters" she held up a quufer nestled on one arm "turn green when they sense danger. Turn green and run off. They're still here, and they're orange. Make of that what you will. Now!" Then her voice cut through the sudden murmur. "All those wanting to stop work and stay close to transport, which is right here, step over that way. Those who want to get on with the job and remember, no veetol can get through this fog, so if the water rises too high and cuts us off, we're gonna have to climb trees and hope for the best! step over there." She pointed to either side.

Philippa watched tensely as people milled around, some muttering. Janith and Arv stood still, waiting; after a long pause the crowd thinned in the center and became two groups.

Faces turned to scan the numbers. Philippa saw that the group she'd joined, the one that wanted to stay and work, was slightly the larger.

Janith gave a short nod. "Vote's decided. Unit drivers, get your sleds. Let's load up and get moving."

Philippa followed the drivers to the wide platform that would one day be a park area for small children. Now, neat rows of various types of hoversled and robot transport equipment were parked there. Philippa saw the gleam of wet planking beneath the pods, and she climbed into her sled, her insides tight.

"There's the peninsula." The lookout pointed at the long spit of land.

Arkady squinted against the bright sunlight, trying to make out geographical features. The shore seemed to be blanketed in a cocoon of soft silver.

"Befogged," the lookout said. "Right back to the jungle line."

Arkady nodded. His hands closed on the rail as the tall mast swayed back and forth, back and forth, high over the sea. He shut his eyes and searched the current. Nothing. Opening his eyes, he said, "Guess I'll get my stuff packed." He climbed down to the deck.

In fog shrouded Elenna, the tension remained high for the rest of the day. Having decided to remain, the Greens worked with a sense of renewed, almost feverish, determination. Philippa found herself

caught up in the pace, and yet she couldn't stop worrying about the quufers, and the water level, and the creature that had destroyed the tents. It wasn't what might actually happen that bothered her as much as the idea that whatever did happen would in some way be her fault.

Just stop thinking, Philippa told herself angrily. She threw herself into the work, matching Kay's speed on the domes, wiring the lower

half even as the other girl wired the higher areas, and running back for supplies in between. For a while, all that mattered was finishing the domes.

Halfway through that long day, lunch was brought in on two hoversleds. "Blues took off!" the driver of the first one yelled as workers converged. "Six splashes as I was comin' out one nearly took your lunch down to the fish!"

The air of reckless adventure seemed to increase in the raucous laughter that greeted this news. Philippa, standing in line, gazed worriedly at the fog-shrouded silent trees above her. There was no telling where the sun was, and she was not wearing a chrono. This day seems to be lasting forever, she thought.

The rest of the day she counted each splash of water, trying to calculate its depth. Would the water suddenly cover the platform before they quit? Or was it the creature, ready to strike?

And if it did, would it be my fault?

She redoubled her efforts until even Kay noticed. The black-haired girl paused once, her sharp angled face wearing a curious, somewhat grudging smile, and said, "You may be slow starting, Worm, but you're not bad once you get going." She cast a proud look down the row of houses they'd wired that day, the metal frames gleaming dully in the haze, and then she flipped over and dropped to the

wet planking. "Come on, let's make it a whole row before sundown."

Philippa realized then that the light was slowly growing weaker. She felt a slight easing in her heart: if disaster was coming, it hadn't arrived yet. Maybe it wouldn't.

Another stretch of uncounted hours later, and it was too dark to see. Hoversleds came humming down the platform, their headlights looking like bright eyes in the thickening gloom. As the sleds approached, the sound of human cries carried. At first weak, the tone undistinguishable, the cries became close enough for the workers to recognize triumph. "Water's going down! Techs just let out the news! High point was this morning, and we're staying!"

A huge cheer went up as the workers converged on the sleds. People squashed together, swaying happily as the news passed through the group. Philippa rode along silently. Now that she knew her efforts1 had not been in vain, she could enjoy the tiredness in her

bones and muscles and enjoy the the relief she felt at the news.

Later that night when the restlessness overtook her, she slipped out of the tent and found herself standing by the railing above the water. Overhead, the glowglobes gleamed steadily through the mist. Philippa glanced up, noticing that the shapes of the lights were more distinct than usual. The fog here had thinned a bit, for once. She remembered having glanced at but not really noticed the green leaves dotting the smooth bark, and among those, were even tinier white flowers that reminded her of snowflakes.

Hearing a slight splashing sound, she looked down into the warer and just made out a long shape, its dimensions and characteristics obscured in the dim light. With a surge and a splash it dove and disappeared. Philippa felt a shudder run through her. Maybe it was the creature or maybe it was something harmless; whatever it was seemed to be gone now. Janith is right,she thought. There's mystery here.

And yet, she was glad they were staying, and not only because she was in no hurry to return to Ambora, She realized with a sense of surprise that for once she felt as if she really belonged.

Belonged... Philippa began walking slowly along the rail, heedless of the chilly air and the dampness sinking into her clothing. It could so easily have been a disaster. She explored the thought a little longer, feeling apprehensive. Belonging carries responsibility. So it would have been my fault for not having convinced them about the quufers or worse, having not tried to contact the quufers myself.

She rubbed her eyes. Every decision I make seems to blow up in my face. She thought immediately of her parents blaming her for their exile from the elite Alphorionite political circle. She'd lived with that knowledge for three years now.

How do you know when a decision you make for yourself is going to affect lots of other people? she thought, remembering how careful she'd been to keep her double life as a revolutionary courier secret until that very last day, the day she got caught.

Now unlocked, her memory flooded her thoughts with other images. Choosing to keep Miguel's sudden arrival on Gauguin a secret from her friends, just when they were counting on her for a group project. Later, when Barrett's pirates had kidnapped Noriko, she and Arkady had wound up in Gandria needing a place to hide. Philippa, worried about Arkady, whom she knew had never been involved in anything like this, had offered to contact Miguel. "He owes me one," she'd said.

And he died for it, she thought.

She rubbed her hands over her eyes again. All the feelings of grief and anger came back, and this time they were focused on her. My

fault, my fault The thought echoed desolately in her mind, and because she was alone, there was no answer.

CHAPTER NINE

Let Me Know if I Know You'

"A week ago they wouldn't have allowed us to dock because of flooding," the captain said with rather dry humor, squinting down at Arkady in the hazy sunlight. "Now you can disembark, but you might be drydocked for a while."

"Why?" Arkady asked.

"Monsters."

The crew members standing around listening burst into laughter. The captain just smiled slightly, as though he'd seen and heard everything in his time, and went on: "You're assigned to the techie camp out on the big floating dock. We'll see the Scout to its berth. Someone named Jilow is coming to meet you."

Arkady nodded, shook hands all around, then hefted his bag over the side. An hour later, he was standing on a complex system of docks and platforms built on floats, which

(he could just barely make out in the fog) was connected with a pier to the mainland. The fog was very thick from the shoreline inward, preventing him from seeing anything of the city under construction.

The shore-boat personnel finished deploying the Scout into the berth the scientists had created, and Arkady stayed only long enough to see that it fit in neatly. He pulled his portable comp from his baggage and logged onto the Scout's comp, checking systems: everything had made the long trip from Ambora without a problem.

Then he turned to find where he was supposed to stay. A quick scan revealed neat rows of small, silver-walled tents. According to a hand-lettered sign, the tent nearest the Scout's berth was to be his new home. He ducked through the door and went in, noticing that someone else's belongings were neatly arranged on one side. Throwing his bag on the bunk in the bare side, hie went out again and started on a walking tour.

This was the biggest of the docks, containing what appeared to be a regular tent-city. They were all fairly small tents, but some had been joined by various creative methods. At some of the tent-row intersections, various kinds of measure rods or supports had been set

up, with hand-lettered signs attached. Arkady walked along the quiet rows, reading Von Kleinmark Plaza (someone liked post-rock opera!), and Acedium Square (which had to be a joke on the barren

rock-asteroid that Will had come from). Other names, like Sherwood Forest and Madhouse Manor Star System Two, were obscure, but Arkady sensed that all were in some way a joke. He liked the atmosphere here.

Wondering about the city, Arkady wandered to the extreme edge of the dock and stared inland, trying to see through the soft gray blanket. Monstersl He hadn't felt like laughing, not when he remembered the horrifying tale Will and Daphne had returned with just a few weeks before. Was Philippa being menaced by huge, carnivorous spiders? He shut his eyes, trying to sense her presence in that fog, but the current was still blank.

He was wondering what to do next when he heard the familiar hum of a hovercraft approaching. He looked up to see a battered old scooter zipping along the undulating ramp, the driver seemingly undisturbed by the lack of stability beneath his vehicle's pressor beam.

The driver lifted a long, knobby-knuckled hand in a gesture that looked lazy at hundred-meter distance, and motioned to Arkady to wait there. He disappeared from view, then reappeared a few seconds later, pulling up to a flourishing stop nearby. Waiting until the craft had settled gently onto its pods, the driver then unfolded his long legs from the compact driver's seat and climbed out. He ambled slowly across the short distance to Arkady, allowing Arkady a good chance to

take in his lank black hair, his bony, homely face and the kind of mournful light-brown eyes that one usually associated with the creatures known as Gaspardian mud-puppies.

"You Davidov, A.?" the guy had a low, lazy voice. "I'm Jilow."

"Arkady Davidov," Arkady said.

"Good show," Jilow said. "Scout all settled in?" he inquired with mild interest.

"In its berth, and all systems functioning."

Jilow gave his slow nod again, rubbing one long hand across the rumpled sleeve of his boorman. Arkady, watching him, thought: He's got to be as tall as Will if not taller!

"We have a situation here," Jilow drawled, thrusting a hand through his straight black hair. "Captain tell you?"

"Said something about monsters," Arkady said, trying to keep his voice light. "I hope these aren't related to the friendly white spiders on Landmass Number Nine Thirty."

Jilow pursed his lips, then gave his head a slight shake. "Heard about those," he said finally. "Didn't like water. Also, they didn't make much noise. What we've got here makes a mighty noise when it

walks." He lowered his voice and pantomimed walking as he intoned, "Bom! Bom! Bom!"

"But you haven't seen it yet?" Arkady asked.

Jilow shook his head slowly. "We're confined to base. Safety reasons fog's still bad."

"But why can't you shouldn't you well..." Arkady finished lamely. Jilow gave him a gentle smile. "You ever heard of Haffnor Liverwell Ferguson?"

"Uh, only by repute," Arkady said cautiously.

Jilow's grin spread all over his long, homely face. When he spoke, it was on a completely different subject. "Your little craft is good and strong, I suppose."

"Has to be. We wanted it to take depth pressures, plus be able to withstand any bangs or knocks it might encounter in your canals." Arkady stopped, sensing a hidden importance in the question.

"You're still cleared, if you like, to begin your tests now," Jilow said thoughtfully. "And if you happen to want to borrow any vidcam equipment or take one of us with you, just as a local guide we'd be happy to oblige."

They're hoping I'll help hunt monsters, Arkady realized. He remembered the Stingers he'd encountered on an undersea expedition a year before. That time he'd had nothing between him and the poisonous tentacles but a wetsuit.

He looked up, to find Jilow waiting. "Can you pack me up a cam?" Arkady grinned. "We built a place to mount one on the Scout, just in case anyone wanted to tape anything."

"I think we're going to be mighty glad you came along, Davidov," Jilow said. "Let's run over now we might make it to Supply and back before the Admin types get out for

Philippa rubbed irritably at her hands, hating the slight stickiness that always seemed to be with her. I must have caught a cold when I worked so hard the day the floods peaked, she thought. I just can't seem to get my energy back. That, as well as everything else seemed to be enormously irritating: from the soft breathing sounds the others made in the tent each night to the random shafts of weak, glaring sunlight that occasionally burst through the clouds and (it seemed) straight into her eyes.

Some of the workers had taken to singing "One more site! One more site!" over and over. Philippa began to think she would throw a fit if she couldn't get away from that endless repetition. Instead, she volunteered frequently to take the sled off to the supply tent but found that she was annoyed by the ragged handling of the hovercraft.

Today, she had no appetite for lunch, so she stopped on an isolated platform and rapidly dismantled the hoversled's navpack, cleaning and

adjusting what she could. She noticed a small part that needed replacing, and resolved to take care of that soon; when she had reassembled everything, the sled ran noticeably better.

If I replace that gyro I'll fix that steering problem, she thought, feeling slightly soothed as the craft moved smoothly over the ramps.

She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed working on hardware.

Just before day's end she made another supply trip, and in the middle of her requests she asked for and obtained the part she needed. On the way back to the site, she stopped again and performed the necessary work. The job was rapidly completed, and she felt the first real sense of enjoyment she'd had for days when she guided the sled back to the site. Steering took an easy flick of the wrist, and the craft turned sharply; speed was no problem, and the tooth-jarring vibration was gone, no matter how heavy the load.

Arkady hit a control, and the Scout moved slowly between the pylons. He looked nervously out the portholes, glad he'd chosen to make this first trip alone. Dad was right it is different here. I've enough to think about without worrying about mysterious creatures.

The Scout drifted gently along the riverbed. Arkady suddenly felt a weird sensation, as if he was being watched. He turned and glanced out a porthole to find himself staring into the weird, bulging eyes of a crimson spadefish, feeling slightly unsettled when the thing paused and gazed back. The eyes were unblinking, and the thin tentacles around the rhythmically gaping mouth moved with a kind of deliberate, slightly sinister gentleness. For a moment he and the

fish studied one another, then the fish flickered and disappeared.

Arkady chose another canal and moved into its dark blue depths. A sudden shaft of sunlight from above stabbed down, warm and greeny-gold, dazzling a school of tiny phosphorescent fish. Then the sunbeam weakened and disappeared.

Arkady tried three more canals, each fairly close to the shore, before he returned to the dock. When he opened the hatch, he found Jilow waiting. "Hi!" the tech greeted him with a lazy smile. "You're still alive!"

"I didn't go very far," Arkady began, then fell silent when a shadow fell on the dock before him.

"What are you up to, Jilow?" a new voice said crisply.

A tiny young woman marched briskly up. Arkady saw a pair of shiny dark eyes and a neat cap of black hair above a round face. "And who's this?" "Just got here yesterday with the Scout, Hazard," Jilow waved a lazy hand. "Which Ferguson forgot goes into the water. How are things up at Devora?"

Hazard shrugged. "Fighting deadlines, of course but at least that city's being built on land. I got a chance to catch up on news while I

was collecting the biotapes. Nobody's got any record of anything that pounds the ground when it walks, and lurks in the fog. Meanwhile, there've been some Team changes ..."

The techs were soon deep in talk. At first Arkady followed along behind, but as the

names, places and technical terms increased, he allowed the distance between himself and the others to increase.

He stopped when he saw a familiar little figure trotting along the very edge of one of the floating docks. A quufer!

He smiled, kneeling down as the creature neared him. The quufer's soft "hairy" scales changed to a deep orange, and it stopped right next to Arkady's knee. He put out a hand and just touched the tiny form, feeling warmth through the thick tangle of scales. "Hi. Have you seen Philippa?" he thought at it.

No answer just as the ones at home in Ambora did not answer. He sighed, wishing communication with them were as easy as it with Sean or the others. He frowned, realizing he couldn't really even sense the creature's presence near him, though of course he could see it. With his friends, it was different. One sensed their whereabouts, sent a thought . and they heard and responded.

Unless it's Philippa, and she's blocked. He lifted his head, listening on as wide a scale as he could. He heard nothing.

His head dropped again. "What is it that Sean does right, and the rest of us can't?" he thought at the creature.

It just sat quietly on the dock.

"Arkady? Where are you?" Jilow called from ahead. "Come on, time for chow. We'll introduce you to the rest of the inmates."

"Coming," Arkady replied. He gave the quu-fer a final pat and ran to catch up with the others.

"That's it for today," Janith called, roaring down the platform in a scooter. "Pack up and get back to base."

"We should finish this row, at least," Kay said, frowning at the interior-installer who fell into the transport with Philippa and Kay and two others. The worker just shook his head tiredly. "We're lucky to get done what we did."

"But you're behind," Kay said sharply.

The man opened his eyes, which were red and bloodshot. "We won't get anything done if we report to the sicktent. Half the team's got some bug, and we're doing the best we can."

"Besides, I don't want to stay out here after dark," another guy spoke up. "Terrin said the water's down to the level it was when we had the stompers around last. I'd hate to be the first to meet 'em if they're going to come back."

Philippa shivered; a weird feeling prickled across the back of her

neck. I'm too tired to think about monsters or anything else. It felt as if the fog had gotten inside her head, and was shrouding her brain. She could barely think, much less worry.

"All right. Back we go," Kay said in disgust.

Philippa sank back and shut her eyes gratefully.

Next morning, Arkady took Jilow out for a

run in the Scout. They kept to the deepest part of the river, and they saw nothing besides fish, and inland, the tall, blue-green marsh grasses that grew thickly right up to the shoreline.

Arkady tried alone later in the afternoon, going farther up one of the canals until the shadowing trees made the water dark and murky. The Scout's sensors caught movement in the water about fifty meters to the north once, but when he edged cautiously in that direction, he found nothing, not even fish.

Intermittently through the day he tested the current, trying to find Philippa. He could not sense her at all; even in Ambora she'd not been this well shielded.

After an otherwise pleasant dinner with the techs, Hazard's voice broke into the turmoil of Arkady's thoughts: "So why don't you give him a tour of the city, at least?"

Arkady turned to see Jilow looking faintly sheepish. "Didn't think to ask. Arkady, you want to go into Elenna? See it from on top of the pylons?"

Arkady tried not to grin. "I'd enjoy that," he said.

Hazard cast an exasperated look up at Jilow. "I'll take him! If you do, your mind will go straight into the fog. Come on, Arkady. I'm not on duty until tonight not that there's any duty yet."

Soon they were zipping along the floating planks, Hazard driving with the same accustomed ease that Jilow displayed. Arkady had to tighten his insides against the constant motion of the ramps: it was one thing to ride the swells of the ocean on a ship, and another to be bounding atop moving ramps in a highspeed hovercraft.

It wasn't long before they roared up a ramp to the permanent pier, and were promptly enveloped in fog. At once Hazard slowed down.

"We've been here for five months, off and on," she said pleasantly. "And we've never seen anything like this fog. Of course, we never saw the flood season either we had to predict it from various types of data. I do think we've had an unusually high one; turns out we had a record snow-pack in the Cynthian Mountains. I expect the fog and the departing waters are somehow related. It won't last, though. The weather was wonderful most of the time we've been here."

"And there were no monsters?"

"Not a one!" the young woman declared. "Of course, none of us have penetrated really far into the inland jungle. No time, no

equipment, and a shortage of personnel. And now, no permission to go out. Still, that won't stop our Director from using us as his scapegoats if we do discover some native lifeform that decides it likes the taste of people. He'll claim that if we'd done our job right, we'd have known. Never mind no one's been here for an entire year's cycle, observing all the changes."

Arkady grinned, enjoyed the fast way Hazard spoke. It was completely the opposite of Jilow's manner, yet he had a strong notion the two were a couple. "Just watch," she went on. "I predict that Ferguson will be coming forward to run for governor in Ambora when Matthews steps down. He's supposedly trying to use his connections to get ahold of one of those kids who reputedly talk to the quufers you won't repeat that, will you?" She cast Arkady a sudden, sharp look. "I talk too much but Jilow likes you."

"I won't say a thing." Arkady raised his hand to promise.

She smiled. "Jilow's usually right about people. Now, here are where the construction teams are housed. This will be city-center, when they're done. What we have is a wheels-within-wheels city plan, and all on platforms. When it's sunny, these giant trees are just gorgeous!"

"Bidding," Janith caught Philippa's arm as she passed inside the tent after another long day. Philippa winced against the pangs of a headache caused by the sudden movement. "Is something wrong?" she asked politely.

Janith gave her a narrow look. "Not that I know of. Arv asked me to tell you that Ferguson's been asking about you. Passed the word down he has a message from your parents I take it he knows them and you can drop by the Admin tent any time and shoot the breeze with the brass."

"Thank you," Philippa said.

Janith hesitated, as if waiting for more of a response, but when Philippa didn't give one, she went inside.

Philippa tried not to think about that as she stood in line for dinner, ate a few bites, then wandered restlessly outside. What does Ferguson want? she wondered. Is he checking up on me? Or have my parents come up with some new, horrible plan now? Well, one thing's certain I don'tintend to see the man to find out.

Philippa leaned against the rail and stared down at the quiet waters. At least I'm not home. All those problems are back there. So why do I feel like this?

Hazard kept talking as she drove slowly along a confusing tangle of platforms, some of which were lined with new, silent, unlit silanna domes in various stages of completion. Arkady looked about him with interest.

They wove in and out of the bigger platforms with the huge silver tent domes; Hazard went on talking, telling stories about camping out on the peninsula and gathering data after some unnamed bureaucrat had flown in, liked the site, and decided to make a city there.

Arkady was not really thinking; he was watching the silvery lights glow softly in the mist, and the occasional graceful arcs of mighty tree limbs overhead. He glanced at people when he saw any, and what he noticed were mostly workers. From time to time he wondered where Philippa was in this huge, bewildering place, but he did not try to reach her.

So he was totally unprepared when Hazard slowed to avoid a group of workers, and he caught sight of a cloud of snow-colored hair back-lit by a glowglobe atop a tent. As if he had spoken, the slim figure in the light-colored Doorman turned abruptly, and Arkady found himself staring into Philippa's wide-eyed, paper-white face.

CHAPTER TEN

The Night Walker

Philippa lay on her bunk and watched drifting pale dust swirl in lazy, mesmerizing patterns. The dust was illumined by a narrow shaft of light arrowing out from the partially opened bathroom door. She felt too cold to get up and hit the mechanism that was supposed to close the door all the way; something was probably jamming it.

Something like all that dust Where's it coming from? It's too moist out for dust! Unable to provide an answer, Philippa's mind veered away and she remembered the shock of looking up and seeing Arkady.

She'd had only a moment of warning: through the ever-present fog in her brain, she'd just become aware of that familiar mental current brain tickle signaling proximity. She'd turned around, and there was Arkady, riding past in a scooter being driven by one of the techs. She'd caught a glimpse of

his face, blank except for startled, light-colored eyes. A long stretch of time seemed to pass as they stared at one another, neither of them making a move, then the scooter turned a corner and disappeared. It did not reappear.

She'd come straight inside, avoiding the others socializing in the rec area, and went straight to bed. And of course, she could not sleep.

He's here with the Scout, she realized, watching the dust motes dance crazily. He built it with his father, so it makes sense he'd come along to test it. Maybe he's even alone, if the winds in Amhora are bad.

Philippa let her mind probe cautiously at the idea of Arkady being in Elenna, and found that she didn't feel much of anything. Mostly, she just felt tired. He hadn't made any move to acknowledge her, and if what he wanted to do was avoid her, Elenna was certainly big enough.

Deliberately, she shut out thoughts of Arkady, and at once another problem surfaced. The team. I belong to a team, and we're behind. She lay there, watching the gentle, almost hypnotic swirls of fine dust, and thinking about her experiences with the Greens so far. This was the first time she'd felt part of anything since Alphorion and the Leffies...

Since Miguel.

She shivered and pulled the covers up closer, impatient with the way her mind revolved tiredly around the same old subjects,

never resolving anything, yet never letting her sleep. At this rate, I might as well get up and do something constructive. She remembered the satisfaction she'd gotten from fixing the hoversled, and her thoughts turned to her sick teammates.

Why not help by installing consoles?

She sat up, feeling that for once she knew exactly the right thing to do. / don't have to tell anyone anything. I know which houses need comps, I know how to install them, I know how to unlock the supply tent now, and... what's stopping me?

A few minutes later Philippa was zipping along the ramp on the sled she'd fixed, the headlights set on low, providing pinpoint beams. She could only see a meter or two into the swirling mist, but by now she knew the ramps by heart and it wasn't as if she was going to meet anyone at this time of night.

She glanced back once in the direction of the Greens' tent; the windows were still dark. She was about to pick up speed again when the first, nearly imperceptible vibration filtered up through the water, ramp, pressor beam, and vehicle.

She stopped and felt a second vibration. Bom. Bom. It was a sound more felt than heard. Philippa cut the lights on the sled, hoping she had not already drawn whatever it was, and sat with her hand on the steering column, ready to jet away if anything appeared.

Her eyes accustomed themselves quickly to the darkness, but the fog prevented her from seeing anything. The thundering boomed louder now. Then, from higher up and not very far away, came the crack of splintering wood. Philippa sat frozen, not knowing whether to stay still and hopefully remain undetected or flee.

A moment later a huge, wedge-shaped saurian head on a long, scaled neck swung down, and all hopes of remaining undetected vanished. The dim light of the hoversled's headlights reflected deeply in one huge, faceted amber eye, then the head swung about and the other eye glittered at her. The mouth opened, and a row of six-centimeter-long teeth flashed dully.

Transfixed with horror, Philippa reached desperately with her mind and felt an alien flicker of energy from the creature.

Then, faintly, came a familiar mental voice: "Philippa?" It was Arkady.

In a reaction that was almost reflex, Philippa cut him off. At the same time the huge head swung abruptly away, and the fog swirled and thickened where it had been.

Bom. Bom. Bom. The steps died away into silence.

She sat for a long time, wondering if she should retreat or go on. Wondering if that flicker of energy had been the creature trying to communicate with her. What if the creature was part of the current as capable of entering her mind as the quufers?

With a shudder, she forced herself to go on. After all, there was no way she'd be able to sleep after that encounter. And, she admitted to herself, there was no way she was going to give herself time to think about the call from Arkady.

Although Philippa was only a short distance from the construction site, it seemed hours had passed by the time she reached the row of waiting houses. She pulled up in front of the first dome, grabbed the power lamp she'd brought from the supply tent, and realized that her hands were shaking. Trying to steady herself, she carefully set the lamp on the floor of the open doorway.

Now to work. Using a collapsible dolly, she brought the console unit for the first house inside. Something about being inside the empty home made her pause. Above, the muted browns of the silanna wall curved overhead, keeping the fog out. Through one doorway she could see that carpeting and storage units had already been installed and the walls painted. In the other direction, part of the kitchen area was set up. The dome was silent with the peculiar emptiness of a place that had not yet had anyone living in it.

This will be someone's home soon, Philippa thought. There was a family sleeping aboard a transport ship right now, soon to awaken for the first time on Gauguin, soon to be assigned here. Was there a girl among them? Someone who felt torn between the old home and the new start she would have here?

Philippa sighed. There wasn't time for the luxury of guessing games. Instead, she guided the motorized dolly to the console area, then went back for the lamp. Setting it up so she could see what she was doing, she lifted computer units out and began to work.

Now her mind sank into the intricacies of the task at hand. This was actually the first time she was installing something this complicated alone but she'd been capable of this kind of work since she was fourteen. Naturally, her parents had disapproved of this interest, considering it to be substatus. Alphas did not work with their hands, unless it was on artwork or petit pointe. Philippa had consequently sneaked every opportunity to increase her skills, so it didn't bother her now to be doing the work alone, on the sly. She was used to it.

She got the computer set up, then tested all the systems except the data net. Heated air blew obligingly out the wall vents, lights flicked off and on; doors opened and water flowed. Everything worked.

"Perfect," she said. Then she packed up hastily and prepared to go

on to the next house.

Philippa stopped only when she had finished her row of domes. By then her eyes were scratchy and her fingers were tired, but she felt good inside as she drove back to the supply area. Carefully, she returned all of the equipment, making sure that each object was put in its place. Then she slipped noiselessly back into the Greens' tent. This time when she lay down, she fell asleep at once.

The alarm seemed to go off seconds later. Around her, voices rose loudly comments on the sounds of the stompers having returned during the night. Philippa shivered a little when she remembered her brief encounter. Still, it was worth it; this was the first time in years that she'd woken up feeling good about something she'd done. She bounded up and took a hot shower, not even caring that the water was the wrong temperature and the drying air made her skin chafe.

The day went by and with the end of the Elenna assignment in sight, the Greens redoubled their efforts. Philippa kept her attention on arriving unit leaders. Twice she had near misses with Ferguson, who, now that the floods were safely gone, was back nosing about. She heard a lot of speculation about the night walkers, but nothing about the work she'd secretly done.

So that night, she went out again. But first, she decided to try something really risky: she decided to check on Arkady. Even though she'd blocked him the night before, she'd thought about him all that day, wondering how he was and whether he was still angry with her. He hadn't tried to reach her either in person or by current. Either he was respecting her privacy or he'd given up on her. To her surprise, Philippa realized that she'd never given up on him.

Philippa been one of the very first in the current to learn how to sense the others' geographic proximity. Now, her mind reached out, and she used this ability to locate Arkady quickly, furtively, lest the quufers be spying. She encountered the familiar image of Arkady sleeping, and she dared to brush a tendril of thought over him. There was a slight stirring. She felt him sense her and waken. And she retreated at once.

Well, at least I know he's all right, Philippa told herself as she slipped out of the Greens' tent. That's all I have to know. She drove slowly toward the unfinished domes, her senses alert and her heart pounding but this time she met no creatures. This time she finished most of one row; she got tired faster, and didn't want to risk making a mistake. Besides, why hurry? She could do this every night, she decided. It made her feel good inside. Finally, she was really helping someone.

The next day she worked hard, feeling a curious sense of isolation between her thoughts and the noise and energy of the other Greens. It

felt as if that peculiar fog in her brain had increased. Probably because she'd been missing sleep, she decided. Whatever the cause, she was reasonably certain that it was keeping the quufers out of her mind and maybe Arkady as well.

When night came, Philippa lay impatiently, fully dressed under her covers, until at last the mutters and rustles of the other women died away into rhythmic breathing.

It was weird, how the brain fog would suddenly lift, leaving her hearing extremely acute.

She felt the fog lifting now and almost at the same time, a mental call flashed across the current: Arkady. "Philippa, we need to talk."

"No!" Her first reaction was panicked, and she forced herself to seem calmer. "Look, Arkady, I'm working I'm doing well here." She sent the thought into the darkness between them. "Why reopen old wounds?"

She waited, tense inside ... nothing.

After a moment, when she was sure that Arkady would leave her alone, she slipped out, welcoming the cool night air. The ever-present fog smelled damp but underneath, stronger than ever, was the elusive sweet smell; she only noticed it on coming out of the filtered air of the Greens tent. Some kind of blossoms, she thought. The new colonists will enjoy it.

Her attention snapped back when she thought she heard footsteps on the far side of the Greens' tent. She froze, turning her head slowly: nothing.

Moving cautiously to the supply tent, Philippa scouted the area, and found it deserted. Palming the lock and slipping in, she quickly got everything together, and was soon driving away, the headlamp narrowed to a thin pinpoint beam on the planking directly in front of her.

Bom! Bom! The night walkers moved in the fog to the south. Philippa slowed, listening for noises of approach, but as usual the ground-shaking steps died away. Another time she heard three sudden splashes in the water below. A school offish, she told herself. This world is awake at night. Only the humans sleep.

It was with a sense of relief that she pulled up in front of the first house of the row she'd chosen. She went about getting her equipment set up, speedy after two nights of practice, and gave herself up to the work at hand.

This, too, she was now much faster at. It seemed no time at all had passed when she straightened up, wiped some damp hair away from her forehead, then ran through her test pattern. Heat? Lights? Doors? It bothered her slightly that she dared not be thorough and test the linkage to the city wide datanet, but she knew she had to be right.

Someone else would just have to perform that chore.

Philippa packed up rapidly and went on to the next house, pausing only when she heard the sound of the night walkers again. This time, there were two of them whatever they were. And, as near as she could tell, they were very close by. She backed into the doorway of the house, staring out into the fog. She heard water splash and heave, and tree branches crackle and snap, then the steps moving away. As usual, she saw nothing.

Alone again, she went back to her chore.

Philippa soon found herself in a rhythm, her mind flowing rapidly between the task at hand and what her hands should be reaching for next, and forgot the passage of time. By the fifth house she still was not tired; she felt she could do another three, maybe, before she packed up to leave.

Her mind was planning for the sixth house as she reached down to perform her test pattern, when something happened that caught her by surprise. The lights flicked on, then off, as they were supposed to; then they stayed on. Philippa jabbed at the toggle: nothing. She was just reaching down to pull the console casing off again when it occurred to her that the lights were coming from another source.

She turned her head quickly: hand-held lamps on maximum brightness were trained on her face from the doorway and two of the windows.

Dropping her tools, she sank slowly onto the brand-new Swivel-Matic console chair. Silent, dazed, and numb, she watched as Arv, Janith, and two Greens walked in, holding their lamps. And behind them, a familiar figure, his imposing form dressed in flamboyant and expensive Vespen tunic and slacks, and his face beaming with triumph.

"Philippa Bidding!" Haffnor Liverwell Ferguson boomed jovially, breaking into a big laugh. "I might have known you'd be behind this! Wait until I tell your parents about this one!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Party Night

The only warning Arkady had was a sudden froth of bubbles washing past one side of the Scout, followed by a violent rocking.

The craft rocked crazily, and Arkady lunged forward, slapping at the stabilizers, the vidcam control, and the steering at the same time. The Scout scudded sideways with a surge of the jets, then shot to the surface.

Arkady peered up through the water-blurred portholes at the biggest creature he'd ever seen in his life. Fog obscured the head; water and vapor churned as a mighty leg lifted, and a big, flat foot smacked the water ten meters away.

The backlash sent the craft knocking dangerously into platform pylons. Thok! Thwack! Arkady stabbed at the controls again, and the Scout plunged underwater and scooted for safety.

"What is that thing?" he threw the question out along the current. "Why can't we hear you when there's danger to us?"

No answer from humans or aliens.

What good is a psychic connection that only works for Sean Matthews? Arkady thought angrily as he reached to turn the cam off.

He was still fighting his various reactions when he got the Scout back to the techie camp. As he entered the main tent he stopped and forced himself to calm down, letting his gaze run over the jumble of portable generators, cables, and computer equipment jammed into this haphazard yet functional field HQ. Despite the lack of space, the techs had still managed to find room to tack up flimsies of articles, cartoons or whatever, all meant to be read and laughed at. Arkady felt steadied by this atmosphere; if only . . . He banished that thought, and turned his attention to the others as a big laugh rose.

"So I guess they didn't say anything about this one, since discreet inquiries about the mysteriously fixed sled hadn't produced any suspects. This time they decided to stake out the site, and catch the person in the act." Hazard was talking. "Oh, hi, Arkady. Grab a seat there's been some interesting action in town."

Arkady clutched his tape and moved silently to a bench near Jilow. A moment later, he forgot his meeting with the monster.

"But what about Ferguson?" a woman asked.

Hazard wrinkled her nose. "Oh, it was his idea, and he had to be in on it. And since he's in charge, the Guilamfis had to go along. After all, they'd reported the console equipment as stolen until one of them discovered by accident that it had been installed right where it was supposed to be."

"So what happened?" Jilow cut in. "Catch him?"

"Her." Hazard dusted her hands delicately. "They staked the site out and watched their culprit drive up, unload the console stuff, and get to work. Went through several houses I guess Janith Guilamfi recognized her first and tried hard to argue them out of the surprise attack. But Ferguson was all for having his fun. Anyway, he was the one who sprung the trap and he nearly fainted when it turned out to be none other than the same kid he's supposedly been searching Elenna for."

Philippa, Arkady thought, a cold sensation going through his middle. In trouble again, and feeling alone again. So this is what she meant by working, doing well doing it all alone. He couldn't find her mind on the current, but he knew it just the same.

"And so?" Jilow put in mildly. Arkady glanced up to find Jilow's eyes on him in an uncharacteristically thoughtful gaze.

Hazard laughed. "Well, that's when Ferguson began babbling, and a lot of this stuff he'd been hiding came out. He wasn't sure

whether to arrest her or pay her extra-time credit! Turns out the girl's on a break from school in Ambora, and her parents are both Planning Committee bigwigs. Agriculture. From Aphorion! Why the kid was put here to do construction is anybody's guess. And as for why she was sneaking out to install computer consoles at night, no one knows that either. But "

"Uh-oh, here it comes . . .," someone joked.

After the general laugh, Hazard grinned and said, "And so, in time-honored fashion, instead of resolving everyone's difficulties, Ferguson is trying to smooth everything over by giving one of his famous parties. Ostensibly in honor of this kid, who I guess had a birthday recently. And two of us representing Technology, I presume are required, uh, invited, to attend. Tonight. So who's going to dust off their good suits and social smiles?"

After some groans, whistles, and comments, "I'll go," Jilow's lazy voice said. "And I think it might be fun for Arkady here to take a break from doing our work for us, and get a firsthand glimpse at the Great Man himself. Arkady?" Jilow turned to him, his long dark brows faintly questioning.

"Sure. I'd like to go," Arkady heard himself say.

Philippa opened her eyes. Someone was standing next to her bunk,

waiting for her to stir. "What is it?" Philippa murmured, her throat feeling very dry.

The figure, whose head had been blocking the light, moved. Philippa found herself staring up into Kay's smiling face.

Kay grinned brightly at Philippa. "Can't you guess? You are going to get me into Ferguson's party or I am going to make life ver-ry difficult for you."

Her tone was cheerfully matter-of-fact, and somehow Philippa could not take offense. She returned a tired smile at the black-haired girl, wondering how she was going to go anywhere. She just wanted to stay in bed, not moving . . . not thinking.

"You can go in my place if we can get away with it," Philippa said. Funny, how her clothes chafed her skin was the laundry here using some unfamiliar cleaning fluids?

Kay's gray eyes narrowed incredulously. "You don't want to go?"

Philippa started to shake her head, but stopped as she felt a sharp warning twinge in her neck. "About as much as I want to chew sharp rocks," she said bluntly. "Ferguson is a friend of my parents ...." She hesitated, then finished lamely, "And anyone they like automatically turns my stomach."

"What is it with you?" Kay leaned on the edge of the bunk, staring down at Philippa. "You don't talk, don't share your gear, and meanwhile you've got all this" she whirled a hand around her head "background!"

Philippa sighed, shutting her eyes. I'll never escape it, I guess. Kay was not the person she would have chosen to find out

about her past, but somehow it seemed only fitting that the inevitable rejection should begin right here and now.

"My parents never wanted to leave Alphorion," Philippa began in an emotionless tone. "They had to when I was arrested. For revolutionary activities. When I was fourteen." A long silence from Kay made her open her eyes again to see, instead of the disgust she'd expected, an expression of wary respect.

"You're joking."

"Wish I was," Philippa said feelingly. The other girl still regarded her with that same respect, and something made the usually circumspect Philippa say, "I should have known being a lawbreaker suddenly makes me interesting to you!"

Kay laughed. "It's because you've done something! You look like one of those sweet little mama-lambs who used to get me into trouble when I was a kid. So what's with the party? You don't want to see Ferguson, is that it?" At Philippa's nod, she added, "He holding the arrest over you or something?"

"I wish," Philippa said. She wrinkled her nose. "I don't know what

he wants but knowing my parents, they've got some sort of awful scheme cooked up. Maybe matchmaking! He's politically advantageous; my mother would love to have a permanent spy watching him."

Kay giggled. "And you don't want him? Why, is he a secret drunk, or something weird?"

Philippa grinned. "No. Nothing like that. I simply can't stand him. Don't tell me you like him?"

Kay shrugged, returning Philippa's grin. "He's ambitious, and so am I. Do you think I intend to spend the rest of my life stringing wires? My talents have destined me for greater things, but my credit status has never put me in the way of those things!" She turned and began rummaging in Philippa's storage cubicle. "So what have you got in here to wear?"

"Don't bother looking," Philippa said tiredly. "Nothing but work clothes; I left the party things in Ambora. Didn't think I'd ever need them again."

She stopped in surprise when Kay squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. "Party clothes? From Alphorion, no doubt?" At Philippa's nod, she went on, "Ordered straight from Vespen and Felicidad, no doubt. Girl, I now believe you're one of those aristos!"

"Why?" Philippa half sat up. "I don't really want them "

" 'I don't want them,'" Kay mimicked. "Because you're so double-corroded, triple-blasted wasteful!. Didn't you even think there's a chance someone else might want them and you could do yourself a prime-grade deal?"

Philippa looked back at Kay in amazement.

"Well? Don't tell me there's nothing in the galaxy you want!" "Flying lessons," Philippa said cautiously, not wanting to admit she'd

begun them in Ambora, and had to stop when she quit school. "I don't see how clothes and flying"

"You ask around, and someone always wants or needs something," Kay said. "Not everyone has unlimited credit! Here's your first lesson in barter: you take me to that party, and I'll get you started with flying lessons."

"With whom?" Philippa asked in astonishment. Kay snorted. "Don't you see anything? You think it's by accident that Dora, who flies our veetol, always lands in just the right spot despite the damn trees, and the fog, and everything? She flew for the P.L. for years, saw action during that bad business with the mallium smugglers in The Professor's Asteroid a few Standard years ago, retired at forty because she got tired of being shot at. Joined up with us because she still likes to travel. And she owes me one," Kay finished triumphantly. "I'd best go roust up an outfit, since you've got nothing here. Remember those

clothes!"

Arkady felt the cool, moist air rushing across his face as Jilow drove up the pier toward the single finished city-center dome. He'd had a call from his father earlier, to ask about the trip and how the experiments were going. After Arkady reported that he was still on hold, Mr. Davidov told him that the winds in Ambora were starting to die down, but they were still on alert status. He'd added that tempers were short in town, and Arkady was lucky to be away.

He'd finished on a questioning note which Arkady knew meant his father was hoping that Arkady's personal quest was going all right. Arkady had returned a noncommittal answer, and they'd cut the line.

Now he was dressed in a crisp new boorman that his mother had insisted he take along. As the lights of the big dome began gleaming weakly through the fog, Arkady felt his heart starting to pound.

I've got to see her and take back what I said, he thought. Even if it's just to hear her tell me, "good-bye and good life." Her parents cut her off from any love they'd had, and Miguel the one person she trusted said good-bye to her as well, before he died.

Arkady moved his sweaty palms slowly down his sides as Jilow pulled up with his typical flourish and cut the engine. The craft settled, and he turned to Arkady and spoke for the first time. "Still want to do this? We can go back."

"Yes," Arkady said.

"Thought so." Jilow unfolded his length from the craft, and they moved toward the doors. There, Arkady gained a swift impression of a huge, partially unfinished rec center. At one side the walls soared in an unmarked curve overhead, and interior construction equipment waited against a partially raised partition. On the other side of the dome, a nearly finished restaurant area was brightly lit and crowded with people.

Jilow waved toward the far end of the crowd. "Going to catch up on the news with a few old friends. Let me know when you want to leave." Arkady watched him amble off, then he turned toward the center of attention. From this distance he could easily make out the voice that had to belong to H.L. Ferguson not just the loudness, but the unmistakable Alphorion enunciation and drawl. Arkady was more than familiar with that note of friendly condescension; he'd heard it every time he'd punched in Philippa's personal number on the comm-link and her father intercepted the call.

Ferguson was a tall, beefy man in expensive clothes; Arkady scarcely spared him more than a glance. What drew his eyes was the small, slender figure next to him, her shoulder stiff under Ferguson's comradely hand.

Ferguson was talking about Alphorion to a small but rapt audience.

As he proceeded smoothly from the difficulties of governing a huge, wealthy old planet to organizing such places as, for instance, this newly emerging world, Arkady circled around the outside of the crowd.

His one thought was to catch Philippa's eyes, let her know he was here. He'd figure out what to do next, based on the kind of reaction she gave him; at worst, he and Jilow could be out of this noise soon.

As he circled, he caught glimpses of Phiippa through the crowd. His first glimpse of

her face showed her sapphire eyes glowing with a strange brilliance. Arkady felt a lurching inside as he thought, She's happy. This, after all, is what she was born to parties, attention, political banter. But as he saw more of her face, the stiff way she sat, and the way her hands were folded he reassessed. That's her armored look. I certainly know it well enough! He noticed that her cheeks, usually so pale, showed two spots of crimson color high on her delicate cheekbones.

Then her gaze shifted, and their eyes met. Arkady swallowed, wondering if he should lift a hand or smile, then her voice-thought took him completely by surprise.

"Arkady, help me "

Arkady stood still for a moment, startled to hear her thought over the mental current after the long silence. Then he roused himself with an effort, and began trying to squeeze his way through the crowd in order to get closer.

He was not having much luck with this when he saw a short young woman with a glossy black ponytail suddenly slip onto the couch near Philippa and whisper to her. Philippa gave a tiny nod, her face eloquent with relief.

The dark-haired girl moved to Ferguson's other side, her body swinging provocatively. "Alphorion sounds wonderful] So tell us, sir, when are you going to get us assigned to a palace job on that planet? We'll even throw in a free secret passage!" The crowd laughed,

and as the focus shifted toward the dark-haired girl, Philippa got up and moved slowly in Arkady's direction. Arkady watched with growing consternation when he saw Philippa's hands come out, her fingers slightly extended as though she needed to feel her way along a wall in the dark. Shoving his way through the crowd, he gripped her arms.

She sagged against him. "So dizzy. No air in here," she sighed.

Arkady cast a quick look back at Ferguson, who was laughing at something that the girl in the red boorman was saying. Satisfied that no one was watching them, he picked up Philippa and headed straight for the door.

Her cheek pressed against his shoulder and he felt heat emanating from it. "Horrible headache," she muttered. "Kay knew. Tell her thank you for covering for me."

Arkady reached the door just as two tall figures loomed out of the crowd: Jilow and a woman he did not recognize, with salt-and-pepper hair. "I think she's sick," Arkady said to Jilow. "If you could help me get her to wherever she stays "

The woman pressed her fingers against Philippa's brow, then whistled soundlessly. "Fever! How'd she stay up this long? And why didn't she say anything?"

"You can blame or credit her background for both, I think," Arkady said. "Philippa "

He felt her tremble in his grip. Gently, he raised her face from his shoulder, and felt his own knees weaken. She'd gone utterly limp, her eyes rolling back in her head.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mind Walkers

"It's some kind of epidemic," Hazard reported the next day. All the humor was gone from her face. "Those idiots on the teams hid their illnesses rather than risk being taken off their jobs and now they've got upwards of twenty people apiece in crisis condition. Your Philippa is one of them." Hazard's voice softened. "She worsened rapidly during the night; apparently she was pretty run down."

Arkady decided he wouldn't concentrate on that last bit of news. "What's making them sick?" he asked.

"The only people who've been stricken are the ones who worked at certain sites," Jilow said slowly. "They've figured out that much. Nothing used at those sites is any different from supplies at any of the others: silanna; various types of adhesive and building equipment. Even the quufers running about are seen everywhere including here so it's

unlikely they're carrying any diseases. What those particular sites don't have in common with the shoreline sites are the trees. The trees and our friends, the amys." He touched a vidtank as he spoke the nickname the techs had given the mystery creatures. "Thanks for the tape, Arkady."

Arkady nodded absently, then asked, "When can I see Philippa?"

"Until they can isolate a cause, and a cure, you won't be allowed to visit your friend. I'm sorry," Hazard said. Her gaze was curious, but she did not ask for any information.

Arkady nodded, thinking, Sometimes I can hear her. That's enough for now. Out loud he said, "So in the meantime, what can I do to help?"

Philippa tried to open her eyes, but the light was too bright. She licked her lips instead, feeling her tongue rasping over them. There was the rustle of cloth, then fingers gently touching her cheek. "Here. Drink," a female voice murmured.

Philippa swallowed something cool, then let her aching head roll back, her energy spent. "Where's Arkady?" she whispered.

"He went back to the techie camp, down at the floating dock. He sent a message. He says he hopes you'll feel well soon; he'll visit as

soon as he's allowed to." The voice was Janith's.

"Janith?"

"I'm here."

"How many got sick?" "A few. Blues as well."

"Janith..."

"Why don't you try to rest, kid?" The fingers brushed Philippa's cheek again, very softly. "Chatter can wait."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the consoles .... I wanted to help, but I didn't want anyone to know about me."

"Don't worry." Janith's voice was warm and silvery with a laugh that she wouldn't allow to escape. "We've had mysteries before, and we'll have 'em again. You're one. Gives the team something to brag about later." Her soft voice altered suddenly; Philippa couldn't open her eyes, but her ears caught every slight change in tone. "You don't have to talk to anybody. And if you get tired of any of your visitors, you just tell the medic. Hear?"

Philippa heard cloth rustle again, followed by Janith's steps moving quietly away then stopping. Philippa caught a familiar voice and accent: "... but I was inoculated against every known virus before I left Alphorion. Furthermore, her parents have specifically authorized me to stand in their place here. Ambora is still on alert status, and they cannot leave."

Janith said, "She's falling asleep."

"I'll just check on her quickly. I promised Director Bidding I would, first thing."

There were rustles, steps, and then Ferguson's breathing. Philippa caught a whiff of mint, then he murmured close to her ear,

"Your parents know you're here, and they want me to make sure you have the best care and everything you need. We'll send you back to Ambora as soon as I can get this medic to sign a release. Meantime, if you need anything, you just tell me. I'll check on you twice a day. All right?"

Philippa nodded.

A hand patted her cheek. She winced at the pressure. "Sleep well, now! I'll be back later," Ferguson said, and moved away.

Philippa slept.

Her mind floated above dark waters. There were lights winking and gleaming on the rippling waves. She watched them, trying to follow their pattern, but it kept escaping her.

I'm so tired. She felt cold, and she wanted to get out of the rocking boat and lie down, away from the water. It was rising again, though; she knew that if she didn't watch it, the tide would surge up and sweep everyone away. If only I wasn't so tired.... But it was her job her duty. She had to watch; if she relaxed and let go, everyone would

be drowned. My fault, my fault.

She moved restlessly, forcing herself to be watchful, wakeful. The waters rose closer, the winking lights moving without cease.

"There's one," Jilow spoke suddenly.

"Here, Arkady," a short, stout tech called P.J. spoke up. "Please just a bit to the left ah!"

The Scout labored in the water; meant for two passengers, the added third made the craft move sluggishly. This was Arkady's fourth trip in two days. Two of those trips had been to drop off-duty techs in the dark tangle of jungle upriver. And these last two, observation.

Arkady heard the whirr of a cam.

"Closer . . . Just a bit. . . it's eating leaves! Wait till I show this to those idiot bureaucrats

Arkady edged the bobbing craft nearer, still trying to keep the cover of a platform without smashing into pylons. As his hands worked, and the techs exchanged low-voiced, excited murmurs, Arkady turned his focus inward. "Philippa?"

No direct answer only another confused jumble of feverish memories: driving a hoversled; the huge, twisted trees; once, a sudden swoop of an amy's huge head out of the fog. His own face, shocking Arkady by its cold and distant expressioitas he said 'Goodbye and good life.' And lastˆMiguel, lying dead in his own blood.

My fault, my fault.

"Philippa?"

"Arkady?" a nearby voice spoke sharply. "We'd better move "

Arkady looked up, startled, and adrenaline jolted through him as massive footsteps pounded sickeningly near. Agitated waters rocked the Scout, and Arkady turned his attention to getting away quickly.

When they pulled up at the techie dock, they saw Hazard run down to the very edge of Arkady's berth. She knelt down, and as the Scout bobbed close she rapped impatiently on the hatch.

As soon as it was open, she exclaimed, "We just got word. They figured out what's causing the illness it's pollen!"

Jilow laughed ruefully. "Just the thing we couldn't test for." "Those trees bud once a year," Hazard said. "A strange thing, too: all the sick people noticed those tiny white flowers, even though they barely lasted a week." She turned and walked with them up to the main tent. "They've been testing all night, and they're not certain, but the pattern is shaping up like this: floodwaters come same time as the buds appear, and the flowers last just as long as the floodwaters do. Pollen drops and goes back inland with the receding waters. The sick people all report having felt slightly sticky or dusty over the last week, but of course no one really thought it worth reporting. Brought the pollen back on clothes and hair and lungs; the spread was inadvertently

controlled by laundry, air-system filters, and showers. Anyway, if that's it, they'll have an antidote soon, and we'll all report for a treatment."

"Will it help those who're already sick?" Arkady asked.

"It should help in one way," Hazard said. "It will halt whatever is causing the reactions. As for the secondary infections, we can treat

those. Don't worry. We've seen weird diseases hit people on many planets, and we can usually knock 'em out of the human system once we've isolated them."

But Philippa's getting worse, Arkady thought. He said nothing, though. He knew the medical staff were doing what they could, as fast as they could.

Jilow said, "We still don't have our go-ahead on the canal experiments, and the other amy-hunters all seem to be out gathering their own data, so why don't we go on up and give Arv a hand with catch-up work, seeing as a good part of his workers are out?"

Hazard nodded energetically. "Now that they've isolated something, the quarantine will probably be lifted. Arv's teanHsˆnot working near the trees right now."

Work to keep him busy and a location near Philippa was what Jilow was offering. Arkady felt a wave of gratitude that somehow made his throat close up. "Sure," was all he could get out.

It was enough. "Then let's move." Jilow jerked a thumb at the waiting Scout.

I'm dizzy. I can't watch this water any more. Philippa tried to turn away from the choppy black waves and the swimming, squiggling lights, but failed. The tent, the dock, were all gone. There was nothing but the water around her now, and she was not staying afloat. It seemed to splash closer to her face with every wave. She struggled to stay afloat, wishing

there were something to grab onto. Just for a moment, just so she could rest. Nothing.

Arkady drove the hoversled back for another supply run, and as had become his habit in the last, long hours, he slowed as he neared the medical tent. Reaching it, he stopped and listened over the current.

He thought for a moment he heard her, as if from a great distance. Then the trace was gone.

Stretching his cramped, tense muscles, he drove on.

I can't remember how to call Arkady. Philippa looked around at the water, which was now lapping coldly up to her face and neck. The lights were nearly gone there was mostly just blackness, sea, sky, and air. She tried to remember what direction the tent was in, and where Arkady was, then she realized she was too tired to lift her voice that

far anyway.

Where were all the people? Had the waters slipped past her and swept them away? My fault, my fault. She hadn't been watching, hadn't been paying proper attention.

Was Arkady drowning, too? For a moment she saw a brief image of his face instead of the black water. He smiled and then his eyes went cold and remote as he asked, "What kind of relationship can I have with a girl who's in love with a ghost?"

A ghost! Philippa looked around. Arkady, I've never seen Miguel as a ghost he went away from me and never came back. For a moment she stood facing Miguel again, seeing the steady gleam from his green eyes as he brushed her cheek with his hand and murmured "Au revoir, linnet." He said "au revoir," but he meant "good-bye."

She thrashed at the cold water. It was splashing against her face now, making it hard for her to breathe. And as she fought to breathe the images came. \.

Her mother, on that horrible, day when Philippa came home from Alphorion's Youth Authority after her arrest. Her mother told her they had no choice but exile. "This is forever," she said. "You've ruined our lives for ever. I hope you can live with that thought. I certainly couldn't." She saw her mother turning, going to her apartments and shutting the door. Philippa had not seen her parents again for three weeks.

She saw Miguel. Back on Alphorion, when his face was lit with enthusiasm as he described the freedoms the citizens would win if the present government were to be deposed; again when he said good-bye; and when she and Arkady went back, led by the theskies, to find Miguel just after he died.

The waves rose higher. She knew she was going to drown, and she wanted more than anything to call for Arkady. No, you can't do that to him. Everyone you love gets hurt. The best gift you can give him is his freedom.

"Goodbye, Arkady," she tried to say, but her mouth was numbed by the water. For a moment she tried to fight free of it, but there was nowhere to go, and nothing to hang on to.

For a moment Philippa thought she heard a distant voice, calling from across the expanse of-water. Was it Arkady? She tried to turn her head, but the water was up to her eyes, and she couldn't move. Then she heard a vaguely familiar tone, in Alphorion alpha-status accents, commanding her insistently to listen.

Ferguson's found me! Panicked, she tried to shout at him, to tell him to go away. Then she realized it was she who should hide or go. Her mouth filled with coldness, and then her eyes and ears, and she slipped away under the waters into silence.

Arkady blinked at the pale disc of the sun, which was just barely visible through the ocean mist. He was tired, he realized as he watched the rest of the workers walk toward their veetol. It had been a long day, and ordinarily he would have considered it a satisfying day, but for the inner conviction that Philippa was worsening.

He dropped heavily onto a bench in the techie transport sled, tuning out the chatter around him and listening on the current: nothing.

His mind stayed blank until the sled had stopped, and he saw Jilow waiting. There

was something about his expression that sent alarm jangling along Arkady's nerves.

"Philippa?" Arkady asked abruptly. He realized it was rude, but Jilow's expression acknowledged his worry Wid confirmed it.

"She slipped into a coma about an hour

ago," the man said quietly. \Still, the medics

think they can stabilize herNtfanything, it

might be better." ^-^

On Jilow's other side, Hazard spoke. "The high fever seems to have made it impossible for her to relax and sleep. She's been very restless." She reached and touched Arkady's arm. "Try not to despair."

Arkady's mind flashed back six months to the Ambora Med Center. "Sean's in the OR." And, later, "He's in a coma," He looked up and took a deep breath. "Thanks." He studied Jilow's still-tense face. He doesn't know Philippa; there must be something else. With difficulty, he forced his thoughts back to the surface again. "Any other news?"

"We're back to killer-monster status. Seems Ferguson left the Med Center just a little while ago, and on his way back to City Center a huge amy head came swooping out of the fog and took a bite right out of the back of his scooter seat."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Circle of Light

Arkady did not really listen as Jilow and two or three other techs went on talking. He half-heard the "what do we do now?" worry in their voices; he registered the fact that Ferguson had ordered everyone confined to quarters until further notice.

Shrugging off an offer of dinner, he instead went to the dock and found the Scout's berth. He swung down inside the craft. At the touch of two toggles, soft light glowed on and air circulated.

For a moment he looked around at the silent, gleaming rows of buttons, lights, toggles, and tiny read-out screens; then he brought the hatch down and dropped onto the seat.

A lot of good my coming here did Philippa, he thought. / guess Sean would have been better in a lot of ways.

He dropped his head into his hands, took a deep breath, and for the first time he forgot his careful controls over himself and his environment, and reached. Vˆ

On the other side of the continent, in Ambora's Transportation Maintenance Yard Sean Matthews dropped a heavy tool with a clank, then gave a pungent exclamation.

"Look, Matthews!" a big, burly maintenance-yard worker exclaimed in disgust. "If you're gonna jump every time there's a little lightning, then we'll never get this thing done."

Sean glanced out the window at the spectacular thunderstorm now smashing its way out of the west after the long days of parched east winds. He hadn't noticed the lightning but that excuse was as good as any. That brain poke on the current just now wasn't Ginny wanting someone to pick up her toy.

He straightened up, wiping his greasy hands on his filthy pants. "So this is the thanks I get for coming down here on a freeday just to help you guys out?"

Various snorts and guffaws met this inquiry. "Who's wanting free parts for those speed modifications to the navpack on his scooter?" another guy inquired genially.

"At the rate I'm working, those parts are worth the equivalent of a new scooter," Sean retorted. "All this rain's making me thirsty. I'll be

back in a tenner don't mess that up." He

walked away, grinning as hoots and insults followed him.

Outside, the rain still slashed down with roaring force. He walked a little ways along the dome, keeping well under the ramp. When he had reached a fairly isolated spot, he leaned back against the wall and covered his eyes with his hands. His mind reached automatically, moving from one familiar aura to another. Noriko was busy instructing some younger kids in aikido; Clea was weeding seedlings at the Greendome; Zach and his mother were watching a new vid just brought in from Galahad's medical university. Ginny was asleep.

"Sean?" The call was very faint and very far away.

"Arkady?" Sean's thoughts arrowed toward the faint, bluish aura. "Arkady, is something wrong?" Arkady's aura brightened and strengthened, but only momentarily. Arkady had never made a long-distance contact before; even for Sean, it was hard, especially standing like this.

"It's Philippa," Arkady's thought carried his emotional distress clearer than the words. "Sick a coma. I think you're the only one who can help her now. I can't do anything "

"Wait. Just till I can get to a better place for this." Sean sent the thought to Arkady, feeling the connection fade along with his words.

Sean opened his eyes, ignoring the slight vertigo this kind of thing always caused. He

went back inside and gave the maintenance crew an excuse, took the good-natured chaffing they handed back, then jumped on his scooter and raced back to Ambora at a speed guaranteed to net him three extra weeks of jug time.

He managed to get home without being caught, only to find that his parents were entertaining guests whom they expected him to greet. Politely. Sean forced himself through one stiff but brief conversation before retreating to his room where he stretched out on his bed, rammed a pillow over his eyes, and tried to find Arkady.

The darkness surrounding Philippa was complete and soundless, but she was no longer cold, and she was no longer unable to move. For a time she floated there, wondering where she was now and where she was supposed to go.

Feeling almost lazy, she turned her head and saw that the darkness had changed; in the distance were flickering lights. Looking more carefully, she noticed that these lights were brightly colored. As they spun toward her in graceful arcs and patterns, she saw that they were not solid or completely round. There was a delicate snowflake quality to them, and an endless variety of fascinating six-sided shapes.

The lights hovered near, and warmth emanated from them. Philippa felt her awareness move toward them, and suddenly they

were

around her. She found herself airborne above a world of steadily glowing lights in an amazing range of shapes and colors. Some of them moved rapidly, some slowly; some glowed more brightly than others. As she watched them, there was a faint sensation of singing, high and harmonic, that transformed the scene into almost unbearable beauty.

They 're alive! she thought with delight.

And she was answered. They are the lives you have gathered in your city. The answer came from one, or perhaps all, of the lights around her. Welcome back among us, the lights sang to her, pulsing brightly. You were long walking alone.

Philippa was a little puzzled by this, until she realized they meant the mindshield she'd used to close them out. She stared and stared downward at the life-lights of Elenna, trying to take in their beauty.

The lights hovered closer. After a time, the words came again. You cannot stay separate for long in this place. We shall take you to the City of the Mind.

Arkady sat in the gently rocking Scout, staring without comprehension at the muted glow of the console. A sudden bright-green mental flash brought Sean's thought to him: "Arkady?"

"Sean, I've lost Philippa. I should have let you come to Elenna in my place."

"What happened?"

"We chased back and forth a little on the current. When she finally asked me for help I could do nothing."

"Where is she now?"

"Med Center sick from a pollen. She's in a coma."

"I think I know how to reach her." Sean's thought stopped when a wordless but distinct sense of failure emanated from Arkady. "What's wrong?"

"I couldn't help her I can't reach her."

Arkady's voice faded, and Sean saw Arkady's memory of the party and Philippa's plea. "Seems to me you helped her just fine," he sent. "As for the current, this isn't a matter of ability or special relationships, either."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm just getting the first clues myself. The quufers don't see each other as separate individuals at least not as we humans see ourselves. They share minds and memories, forming... I don't really have words for it... it's like this great ancient harmony. It's probably as old as the world. We can't really hear it or see it until we've joined it."

"You've joined it though."

"Once but it's not easy for humans. You have to drop all your

barriers, then leave your body behind. Took me nearly being killed to figure it out. Now I know how, but it's still risky can't do it long, or I might never make it back to my body."

"I'm afraid to try that," Arkady admitted.

"So was I. No one who's human is really prepared for this kind of risk."

For a long moment there was no response from Arkady. Finally, he asked, "If you joined this harmony once, does that mean you can reach Philippa now?"

"I think so. Shall I try?"

Sean waited, and Arkady knew he had to want Sean to find her, or Sean would not look.

"Help her. That's what matters most"

Sean's thought flickered away, and Arkady opened his eyes, somehow surprised to find that he was still in the Scout. It was hard to gauge how long he'd been sitting in the tiny craft, but all of his muscles felt cramped, and suddenly he knew he couldn't stay there any longer. He climbed out and began walking aimlessly down the dock.

He walked until he reached the shoreline, then dropped from the dock onto the sands and continued on along the edge of the surf, watching the mist roll gently across the ocean. Has Sean found her? he wondered. He listened . . . but all he heard was the sound of the surf, and the far-off mewing of strange sea creatures.

At the edge of the sandbar he turned and walked along the shallow riverbank, batting absently at the tall marsh grasses, thinking of all the things he wished he'd said. What if Sean can't reach Philippa? What if she never makes it back?

As his mood grew darker, so did the land around him. He walked past the first few trees without really seeing them; he didn't notice that as he traveled inland, the trees became thicker and taller. When the plants got so thick he had to push his way past, he just slowed his pace.

It was not until he heard the ground shaking that he noticed his surroundings. And it was not until he looked up, and saw a huge reptilian amy following his every movement, that he realized he was completely lost.

Before Philippa could frame a question, the whirling lights moved apart and she was gazing up at a complex tower made of light. She looked upward; the structure seemed to go on forever.

Philippa moved toward it, and found herself in it. Around her moved lights of every color possible in the spectrum. They moved in harmony, some upward, some down, and some beyond sight until they winked among the canopy of stars.

At the same time she perceived a high, sustained, voiceless singing, on a note or chord more beautiful than any melody she'd ever heard. Listening, she realized that voices came and went, blending and reshaping the song without end.

She was still marveling when she became aware of a new light among the crowd still by her. Her focus changed, and she perceived a

brilliant green bubble, nearly solid. "Philippa!" it greeted her.

"Sean!" she responded in surprise. As soon as she identified him, memory seemed to flow back, flooding the space around her with glimmering images of her past. For the first time since she saw the lights she felt apprehension. "What's wrong? Where's Arkady? What's happened?" she thought at Sean.

"Arkady called me over the current because you landed yourself in Elenna s Medical Center in a coma." Sean's words brought back more immediate memories, but his humorous, slightly astringent tone somehow drained them of the horrible emotional weight she'd been carrying. Just as she realized he was looking at the images as well, he added, "So I came but I had to get the quufers to help. Last time I was here, I was in the coma, and I wasn't about to try finding my way back by that route!"

"Quufers," Philippa repeated, taking in the comforting circle of bright lights.

"Welcome to our City of the Mind," came the answer.

Philippa wondered if they knew what she'd thought of them then she remembered how thought traveled here. Yet it was not the quufers but Sean who responded. "It's hard for us humans to drop our mental barriers like this, but I guess we're going to have to learn if we're to get along on this planet. And frankly, I could use someone else to help me do this kind of stuff. None of the others can

reach this far as yet. You'll be able to, now that you've done it once. Maybe you can help Arkady learn it's going to be even harder for him."

Phllippa did not frame any response. Instead, she sought the gleaming City again, and the flow of lights peacefully moving toward it, through it, and away. She perceived the high, singing sensation again, and as her awareness expanded to embrace it she experienced, just for a moment, the exalting totality of shared mind, shared memory.

"That's where their civilization lies, now, evolved over those countless centuries. They even look at time differently as limitless, without boundaries. Every entity to come in is celebrated . . . and every entity who goes beyond the City is committed forever to memory."

A pang shot through her when she remembered the hurtful

memories she'd taken down into the coma with her. I was wrong, she thought. Remembering her petty angers, her certainty that the quufers touched minds only to spy, she felt as if she'd thrown dirt on the beauty around her. Most painful of all was the memory of Miguel's death.

Then she had a surprise. As the quufers accepted her memories into the group mind, they in turn offered her a memory: the last moments of Miguel's life, as seen by the theskies he was saving. Philippa now lingered on that memory: Though he must have known his lifeblood was draining away by

the second, there was a slight smile on Miguel's pale lips and a sharpness in his eyes as he took careful aim with his trank gun at the mallium miners. He wanted to die in action, she realized. He was doing something meaningful saving Arkady and me, and also saving the creatures that the miners were shooting down. I remember he was ambivalent about the Leftie fighting back home, but this fight was one he knew was right.

The hurtful emotions did not last; the light bubbles allowed them to dissipate, leaving everyone unchanged. Philippa embraced the memory of Miguel with mind, heart and spirit, and let it go.

"Uh-oh," Sean's mental voice now streamed with suppressed laughter. "You might say there's still a problem. It's just as well we can't stay out of our bodies too long you'd best get back quick and fix it...."

Images flowed swiftly between them, then Philippa rushed through the velvety darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Friends and Amies

Arkady felt his nerves tingling with instinctive warning when he saw the huge head loom insubstantially in the mist, then resolve rapidly into a wedge with a wide, tooth-lined mouth and huge, glowing amber eyes.

The head soared a good five meters overhead, arching to look out of one eye and then the other at Arkady. Boom! Stomp! The ground vibrated as mighty feet splashed down in to unseen water.

Arkady turned and pushed through the thick tangle of undergrowth. The creature was coming after him, moving slowly but still gaining on him. On the other side, Arkady heard a shriek high in the trees, and the rapid chatter of other animals.

"Go away! Go away!" Arkady thought desperately, but as usual he felt no response.

He turned and struck out in another direction, pushing furiously at the undergrowth.

The amy came after him, the head throwing a shadow on Arkady's path as it swooped down.

Arkady ducked to the side, fighting distractedly to keep away from the huge feet. He remembered the rumor about the amies being leaf eaters, but that would not help him if those giant feet came down wrong.

Unfortunately, his flight served to attract the local wildlife; he found himself surrounded by at least a dozen lizardlike creatures of different sizes and shapes, all with colorful scales and big, sharp teeth. As he passed one, it took a swipe at him with its razor-sharp claws, ripping a hole in his boorman.

"Yarrrgh!" the creature shrieked, bounding after him.

Arkady made it to one of the huge trees, and whirled around to put his back to it. "Go away!" he shouted as loud as he could. "Get out of here!"

The creatures ringed closer, and one reached with its claws. "Arkady?"

"Philippa!" Arkady yelled.

Her mental voice responded at once, strong and joyous and self-

assured. "I just found you the quufers said they heard your danger. Call to those creatures over the current. They're only curious and they don't know how fragile we are."

"I've tried that," Arkady sent back, ducking another clawed forearm; this one had talons a good six centimeters long.

"Try again. Close your eyes, and really throw your mind out to them. The quufers will hear you and they'll help."

Arkady sighed. He'd had trouble with the concept of shutting one's eyes and throwing minds around even while sitting around in comfort at home. Now, while keeping an eye on the converging cannibals here, it seemed impossible.

"Do it, Arkady. I'll help and so will the quufers but we need you to give them a location."

All right. If he couldn't trust the current now, he never would. Arkady pressed his clammy hands against the rough trunk of the tree, and closed his eyes. "I'm here .... I'm here. . . ." He caught a flicker of light along the current and nearly lost his concentration.

"Keep it steady," Philippa called, her mind-thought warm and close.

"We sense your danger, and we draw the curious ones to the water," a soft, unfamiliar mental voice whispered to Arkady.

Then the lights drifted away. Arkady opened his eyes. The thick brush stirred as the creatures disappeared. The amy, however, still remained, staring at him with what, in a human, might have been suspicion. Then, with a stomp and a crunch it swung away and splooshed into the water, sending a shower high into the trees. Philippa's voice was back in his mind. "A lot of

people have been in danger here, and I seem to have been the cause."

She's blaming herself again, Arkady thought, but only sent, "How could you haveˆ anything to do with this? You just saved me."

"What I mean is, all creatures on this planet, to some extent, seem to be connected mentally. The theskies we knew about, of course; they are bound closest to the quufers. But all the creatures can be called upon for aid, and the quufers try to protect them."

"So how do we fit in?" Arkady asked as he pushed his way back toward the river. "And what's wrong? The quufers seem to see other humans much like they view the creatures here, only they can't hear them or protect them. With us the eight of us and Ginny it's different. They hear us they want to protect us. And what happened the other day... I was thinking bad thoughts about old Haffnor Liverwell just before I went under, and the quufers were listening and trying to reach me, but I wouldn't let them in. They read my animosity as a danger sign so what's going on is, the local critters are on the watch

for him!"

Arkady tried not to laugh. "So what now?"

"I need you to help me. We've got to arrange a demonstration that will leave no doubt in anyone's mind."

Even though he could not see or hear her, that mental voice was like the old Philippa, assessing a problem and proposing solutions. Like the old Philippa, only . . . different. Happy and turning to him.

"All right. What's my part?" he asked her calmly, wondering if she could see him standing there in jungles of Elenna, silently brushing away his tears.

Half an hour later, he stared down at the city center of Elenna from a perspective he never thought he'd see and he was not sure he'd want to again. Stomp! Doom! "I can't believe I'm riding one of these monsters!" he muttered to himself.

"Just hang on and help me hold its mind," Philippa laughed soundlessly back. "You're tickling it and it wants to shake you off,"

The heavy steps jarred right up through his teeth. As he and his mount emerged from the jungle, a stream of curious creatures followed them, all shrieking, squawking and chittering.

Sploosh! The tremendous feet plunged into the river. Arkady clung to the rough, scaly neck as blue water rushed by. Behind him, he glimpsed the train of creatures gathered along the riverbank, all still hooting and shrilling.

People gathered at the rails all around the cluster of big Admin tents, domes, and vehicles, at first gabbling at each other in a way that reminded Arkady of his recent jungle followers. As the amy made its way directly toward the huge central platform, the crowd fell into shocked silence.

The monster brought its head down lower, lower, and the nose slits whiffed delicately. The crowd faded back, leaving a big ring of space around the rail.

The creature's thick skin twitched once or twice, as though trying to dislodge the tickle-some mite, then Arkady leaped for the railing and swung his legs over.

Jilow found his voice first, "Davidov, you're insane."

Arkady grinned and cleared his throat. "The quufers say that the amies won't hurt us," he told the ring of stunned faces. "But we'll have to be watchful. They'll never be what we'd call tame beasts." A babel of voices broke out, and Arkady was swept along with the crowd to the Admin tent.

Philippa was exhausted when she left the creature's mind-bubble. She dropped happily back into the here-and-now and slept.

She slept long, awoke, was given something to drink, then she slept again.

When at last she woke and opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the pale gleam of sunlight in the high windows adjacent to her bed. As she watched, the familiar gray of Elenna's fog slowly obscured the sunbeam, but Philippa found the softer light pleasant as well.

She turned her head on the pillow, and was startled to see someone sitting next to the bed. She recognized Kay's shiny black ponytail, and saw that Kay sat, chin in hand,

watching a small vidtank set up across the room. Philippa worked her dry mouth and said, "Hi."

Kay jumped as if she'd been poked. "Yeep! You're awake!" she gasped, leaping up. "I'm supposed to tell someone immediately! Back in a moment."

She whisked out but returned promptly, her face alight with lively interest. "Whew, you do cause a stir when you get going, Worm! How are you feeling?"

"Not bad," Philippa answered with a smile.

Kay studied her critically for a moment. "Hmm! If you weren't as pale as printout paper, and about as thin, I'd say you'd needed that rest. In some ways, you look better."

"I guess I needed the time to sort some things out," Philippa said.

"In a coma?" the other girl asked incredulously.

"Well." Philippa realized she was going to have to be careful. Still, nothing could really disturb that buoyant feeling inside her. / belong: the quufers in their city celebrated my coming. And Arkady wants me back. I truly belong. "Did they, uh, find out what it was that caused the sickness?"

"Pollen," Kay said. "We've all been treated, and the antidote will be part of the food here from now on. Case solved. There've been some other interesting things ..." Kay studied her again, then said abruptly, "Your voice sounds pretty scratchy yet. I should probably stop yakking and get the news back to the other

Greens. You sleep well and remember about those clothes when you get up!" She winked and bounced out. Philippa sighed, stretching slowly. She could tell her body was weak, but that wouldn't last long. Her mind felt energetic; she lay down and thought over the amazing experience she'd had in the Realm of the Mind, until she drifted into sleep again.

She slept soundly until a familiar scent brought her awake. Opening her eyes, she saw H.L. Ferguson lower himself into the visitor's chair. His grade-one political smile was firmly in place, displaying even white teeth.

"I put a call through to Ambora," he said after greeting her. "Your good parents were delighted to hear of your recovery, and they hope to see you at home soon."

Philippa felt and suppressed a flash of irritation at having her life handled so summarily. After all, she didn't have to go back just because they said so, did she? She smiled. "Thank you," she said. "Is there any news?"

Ferguson sat back, and adjusted one of the rings he wore. "When you are well again, we'll have to introduce you to the amies," he said.

"What's an amy?" Philippa asked innocently. "I mean, I know what it means in Old French, back on Alphorion "

"I thought the name might be appropriate," Ferguson responded. "Turns out those noisy creatures with the big feet are leaf eaters with those theskie things running up and

down their backs, more often than not. The alarm turned out to be an accident, though I didn't appreciate being the first victim, they must have thought the scooter seats were some kind of new leaf. As that Davidov kid says, we'll have to be careful, but the bio team has it all figured out."

"Oh, I'm so glad," Philippa said. "So now the city can be finished?"

"I think I'll be able to report to Ambora well within the allotted time, despite everything," Ferguson said importantly. He shifted position, casting a quick glance behind him. "What I was hoping to ask you, now that we've finally managed to locate one another and have a spare second or two ..."

Oh no! Here it comes, my parents' latest rotten plan but not if I can help it. "Is it about the Greens?" Philippa slipped the question in skillfully when he paused to draw breath. "I assure you I'd love to finish the assignment."

"Well, as to that, your parents have definite ideas seems they didn't know you were here but we can go into that later." He waved a pudgy hand and a big square-cut emerald glittered on his finger. "What I wanted to ask you "

"What a beautiful ring!" Philippa exclaimed. "Of course a family heirloom. Liverwell or Ferguson side?"

"Bought it on Old Earth," he said with a brief smile. "For starting my own dynasty." He

winked. "Guess that'll lead right into my big plans."

"What?" Philippa exclaimed, confused. "Your plans? What about my parents' plans? I thought you were here to ," she stopped.

Ferguson frowned a little sheepishly. "Well, as it turns out, they have the same plans that is, for themselves and I hasten to assure you that I respect and esteem them most highly. But for a position like governor..." He paused and reached into a soft cloth bag Philippa hadn't noticed until now.

To Philippa's utter amazement, Mr. Ferguson carefully brought out a small, hairy-scaled figure colored a disquieted green a quufer! He

set it delicately on Philippa's bed. She reached a hand out and stroked the soft scales, then stroked again, whereupon the creature began to change to a deep, contented orange.

"Kwoo,"it said.

Philippa reached again, then froze, startled, when Ferguson lunged forward and grabbed her wrist.

"Look, Philippa," he said in an urgent undervoice. "Much as I cherish your parents, I really feel I'd be the best candidate for governor. And if you were to share the secret of these things' language, every citizen on this planet would vote for me. Do they really talk? And if so, how?"

"Kwoo," the quufer said in its little voice.

"Kwoo," Philippa said back solemnly, stroking the soft creature.

Ferguson snatched a small pocket comp from the pocket of his tunic and leaned forward intently. "Kwoo," he muttered. "So what does that mean?..."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Home Is Where the Heart Is

"So it's a laugh on me," Philippa said to Arkady two days later. "I've been creeping around, terrified he was my parents' spy here, and all Ferguson wanted was to be the first politician to talk in Quufer lingo!"

Arkady laughed as they walked slowly to the waiting area for the aircar to Ambora. All around, construction teammates talked and laughed, hefting bags of gear; a party atmosphere prevailed. Some of the departing Greens came up and wished Philippa a good trip or exchanged other greetings. Watching her smile and return the banter, Arkady saw that she was thin from the days of fever, but her expression reflected good health within. "So what did you tell him?" he asked when they were alone again.

"I told him that Kwoo means Kwoo, as far as I know, and that they communicate from mind to mind, which isn't anything I can do With

any regularity. He was pretty disgusted. Didn't really want to hear any more. Discovered he had an overdue appointment, thank goodness."

Arkady smiled, watching how the smile lighting her sapphire eyes made them more brilliant than ever. She laughed again, then added, "Will my parents be disgusted when ifthey find out?"

"Don't think about them," Arkady said.

Some of the luster dimmed from her eyes. "I guess some things don't change." She tipped her head forward slightly, and her snow-white hair stirred in the breeze, hiding her face. "They didn't come, and they never even bothered to call; they sent him. On the surface it looks oh-so-good: the devoted Biddings standing by during the big winds in Ambora, despite the personal tragedy of a comatose daughter except there wasn't any real need for yellow status alerts in agriculture!"

"And now?" he asked.

She shrugged. "The job is done, and I've got to go back. And the more I think about it, the less I want ever to see them again."

"Maybe you shouldn't, then," Arkady said. "I'm sure Dr. Ives will help you avoid them. You've been sick, and you don't need the stress. I think the whole gang will be glad to go get your stuff and help you

move, too. You shouldn't have to see them again any time soon."

They were interrupted by a bell in the spaceport lounge. Everyone picked up their bags and converged on the craft.

The noise was loud, and for a time neither of them spoke. Arkady was content to jostle along, shoulder to shoulder, with Philippa. Soon they had made their way up the ramp and found seats next to each other. Philippa dropped into hers with a sigh; she still tired easily.

Arkady got them something warm to drink, and then the belt light came on. Within minutes the aircar rose smoothly and circled above Elenna. Arkady watched Philippa press her forehead against the glass, staring down at the city on stilts. "It's so beautiful," she murmured, her breath frosting the glass.

Arkady glanced out, looking at the city dropping away rapidly beneath them. The canals sparkled like bracelets of sapphire, set in a velvet-green casing. It was beautiful, though he realized she didn't mean just the physical city.

She'd spent most of their visiting time the night before talking about the quufers' City of the Mind. They'd even tried to reach it, but whether Philippa was too tired by her long first day out of the Med Center, or whether they were too distracted by one another's presence after the weeks of separation, neither had found it.

Arkady had felt disappointed until she said, "It's there. I guess when we really need it, we'll find it."

He'd accepted that, feeling mostly just glad to have her back.

Now she looked up suddenly. "I was just remembering what you said about the ship cruise. I want to try it," she said. "Shall we sign up for work on a cruise when we get done with school?"

Arkady grinned. "It's what I was thinking of doing," he said cautiously.

Her eyes met his. "You don't want to talk about the future?" she asked directly.

It was the one subject they'd avoided during these past few days. Feeling his way, he said, "I haven't really thought much beyond the fact that I'd like to spend some time on a ship."

"Delicately sidestepping the question of 'our future.'" She smiled. "I guess I want to know where I stand. If you still feel that way about ghosts."

He shook his head slowly, reaching for the right words. "I made the ghost," he said finally.

"We both did," Philippa said. "I tried to take responsibility for my decision, when I asked Miguel for help, but somehow I never considered that he made a choice as well."

"I thought your feelings were another kind of regret. That if he'd lived, maybe you'd be there with him now."

"Oh," Philippa said with a heartfelt sigh. "Oh, Arkady. I wish I'd known I would have told you. When Miguel said good-bye the first time, it hurt, but I got over it. It wasn't as if I really ever knew him. He was more of a first hero than a real first love."

"And Sean ..." he said quickly.

Philippa grinned. "And dating Sean was a great opportunity for both of us to pick fights. Then he'd go straight to Clea to complain about me. And that's the extent of the loves of my great past! Anyway, if you don't think you can continue . . . well," her voice became shaky, and she hurried on before she lost her courage, "I keep learning about friendship. You stuck by me the way a friend would, just as Sean came to help me in the quufers' City of the Mind. If that's all you want, friendship, I can handle it."

She wants to he with me, Arkady said to himself. If she once felt more for Miguel or Sean well, it's not that way now. Arkady felt his own burden dissolve, and then he became aware of how long he'd let the silence stretch. He said, "I don't know what I want for the future, except I know I want you to be there in it."

Philippa let out a deep breath, then turned to face him. She was smiling. "And I'm such a comfortable, easy companion," she joked. "Though I am learning!"

"You're you," Arkady said, taking her face in his hands and kissing her.

Philippa found herself wishing very strongly that she and Arkady were alone, instead of sitting in a public aircar. She sensed that Arkady felt very much the same way. And after they both spoke at once (trying to introduce a neutral topic) and laughed, Arkady spent the rest of the journey describing things that had gone on in Ambora since her departure.

She listened eagerly, asking questions or making comments, but just before they landed Arkady gave her a searching look from those light, cool eyes, and murmured, "You look tired."

She shrugged. "A little. I hope Dr. Ives got my message."

As soon as they landed, Arkady began scanning the crowd gathered to greet passengers. "Ah," he said finally. "I see him talking to Dr. Yamoto."

"Zach's mom," Philippa said as they left the craft. "Good. I hope that means she agreed to be one of my "

She didn't get any further. A moment later, the other six members of the gang spotted them and swooped down, everyone talking at once. For a minute or so everything was chaos, then Sean prevailed. "Hey, Arkady," he said. "You sure kicked up a medium-grade dust pulling that stunt."

"What, riding the amy up to City Center?" Arkady was grinning.

"And saying the quufers sent you."

Arkady met Philippa's eyes across the crowd, and it was her turn to grin. "That was my idea," she said. "And it was true enough."

"You know what this means," Sean said. "Now the local honchos are going to fight over who's going to get their mitts on you first. You're going to get mighty sick of telling that story."

"I already am." Arkady shrugged. "Jilow and his gang of Elenna-based techs threatened to hide me in the jungle and feed me nothing but squash-worms unless I talked. So I did. Every night, until they finally let Philippa out of the Med Center."

Philippa saw Zach and Sean exchange sober glances.

"I guess we're in for it now," Daphne intoned. "The Grand Inquisition."

"We knew it was coming," Noriko put in matter-of-factly.

"I guess I was hoping we'd have time for dress rehearsals first," Daphne said with an expressive shrug. "You know we'd all be good at finding the quufers over the current, and talking back and forth. Everything would be... simple."

"It's never going to be simple," Philippa said. As the others' turned to her she went on, "Humans and quufers are too different. The techs and everyone may as well find out now."

General conversations broke out then, and Philippa used the moment to step up next to Sean.

"How're you feeling?" he asked, grinning down at her.

"Okay. Look, Sean, I want to apologize for everything."

Sean waved a hand. "So what are friends for?" He gave her a wicked look. "Especially now that I've got some backup in trying to teach these six toroids how to quufer-call."

"Who are you calling a " Daphne stopped as she suddenly found herself face-to-face with Philippa's mother. Her tone changed radically: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Bidding."

The tall, faultlessly dressed woman gave Daphne a wintry smile. "Good afternoon Clea, is it?" Her tone said "if not, no matter," and she transferred her gaze to Philippa "Hello, dear. It was kind of your schoolmates to meet you, but as you've been ill, I think it would be wisest if we get you home right away."

Philippa felt her insides go cold. "I "

Arkady stepped up to her side, and Dr. Ives appeared on her other side. The director of the school nodded politely to Mrs. Bidding, but addressed Philippa. "Dr. Yamoto and I are prepared to take you "

"Philippa," Mrs. Bidding cut through smoothly in her perfectly modulated voice. "Where is your valise? Allen?" She gestured, and Philippa's father, tall and gray-haired, moved inexorably through the crowd and reached for Philippa's bag.

Clea stepped forward bravely, her cheeks flushed and her eyes enormous. "We'll see her home, Mrs. Bidding."

"That we will," said Dr. Ives as Philippa felt the gang ranging protectively around her. "Shall we go, students?"

"Please do," Mr. Bidding said suavely. "But without our daughter."

Mrs. Bidding gave him a slight, poisonous
smile and added sweetly, "I'd so dislike to
have someone point out the unfortunate coin
cidences that your background shares with
Philippa's "

Philippa felt anger sweep through her. She said, "That's untrue and unfair, and who cares about Alphorionite politics here, revolutionary or not?" She saw her mother open her mouth, and she asked abruptly, "Why do you want me to come home, anyway? Because it might look bad if I don't? I understand from Mr. Ferguson that you're intending to run for governor when Mr. Matthews steps down. Funny, you didn't tell me."

Mr. Bidding said, "We can discuss values and family loyalty in our own home."

His voice was cold and soft, and Philippa felt herself caving in from habit from her lifelong wish that somehow, just once, she could do something to please these two perfect people before her. They stood there, looking at her with all the warmth and love of two marble statues.

Then her eyes blurred, and she didn't have to see them. "I won't go," she said. "Because
it's not my home anymore. I never felt at
home with you, not even when I was a little
kid fighting for top marks at the Academy.
You weren't even happy with me then not
if anyone else's grades were higher. And ever
since I was arrested, you've never stopped re
minding me of my mistake. That's not loyalty
or value." .

"Bravo," Dr. Ives said softly.

Mrs. Bidding's cheeks flushed, and she sent the principal a venomous look.

"I'll tell you what loyalty is," Philippa went on, finding her voice getting stronger as she looked around at her friends' faces. "That's sticking by someone even when she messes up. And if she asks for help, they're there. And when they want help, you want to drop everything to go to them because you're important to them, and they are to you." Her eyes rested last on Arkady's face, and she dashed tears away. "That's what I have with these people my friends. I don't have a

home with you, so I'll make one, somewhere else. And they'll be welcome it can be their home, too. Goodbye." Her voice quivered but she didn't care.

She turned away, feeling strength, warmth and support from seven minds around her.

No one spoke until they had reached the Dr. Ives's hovercraft. Since there were only four seats, Dr. Ives said, "The Davidovs expect me to drop Arkady off, and I really should give Dr. Yamoto a ride back since I brought her all the way out."

Sean grinned. "That's okay, sir. We'll squeeze up in my dad's craft."

"Dinner at my place; everybody be there," Zach added.

"Did you clear this with your dad?" Dr. Yamoto asked, smiling.

Zach waved a careless hand. "Think he'll even notice?"

"Probably not, especially if you tend to the cleanup," his mother replied.

On Zach's groans, the two groups parted.

Philippa held Arkady's hand tightly once they were seated in the Dr. Ives's hovercraft. Philippa sank back, feeling drained but relieved.

Up front, Dr. Yamoto half turned in her seat, her warm brown eyes friendly and reassuring. "Think you can accept us as guardians?" she asked. "Oh, and Dr. Kovitch said she'd be more than willing to serve as the third person on your committee."

Philippa nodded. Her voice was still a little wobbly. "I like Dr. Kovitch a lot."

"She apparently thinks pretty highly of you as well," Dr. Ives put in. "She's a busy woman, but there will be time for you whenever you need it. This should be final in a ten-day. Meantime we've signed a temporary lease for you at the singles complex across the river from the school dome. Your pay from your construction job should take care of one rotation's worth of rent and food, and for the rest we'll work out a new schedule of community-service trade-offs. Maybe some tutoring in math with the younger children. It won't be easy," Dr. Ives went on, "but it will be a good start."

"And we'll be here if you need us," Dr. Yamoto said.

"That's a promise," Arkady said softly.

Philippa sighed, and Arkady looked at her questioningly.

She sent a glance at the adults, who were talking quietly in the front. Squeezing Arkady's hand, she sent a thought over the current: "It's funny to think I'm about to have my own place but I'll never be lonely again."

Arkady grinned. "Shall we start on that right now?"

He reached over to give her a quick, soft kiss. Up in front the adults went on talking as the craft drove through the balmy Gauguin afternoon.